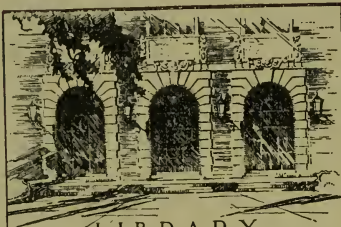


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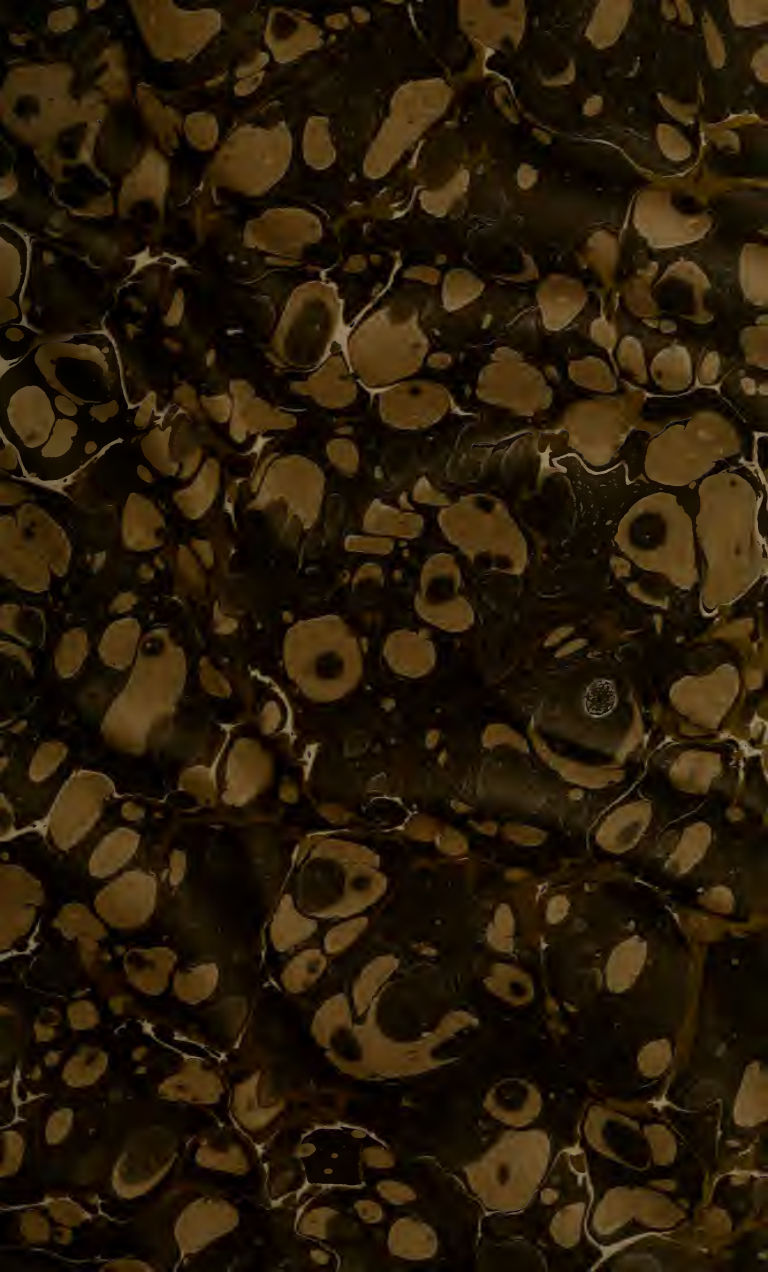
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IN TRUST

THE STORY OF A LADY AND HER LOVER

BY

M. O. W. OLIPHANT

AUTHOR OF 'THE CHRONICLES OF CARLINGFORD' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.

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OF

THE SECOND VOLUME.



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IN TRUST.



CHAPTER XIV.

THE SPECTATOR'S VIEW.

A FEW days passed, and the new cousin continued to be very popular at Mount. Mrs. Mountford made no secret of her liking for him.

‘Of course,’ she said, ‘I was never partial to the other branch, especially having no son myself. The Mount family has never liked them. Though they have always been poor, they have claimed to be the elder branch, and when your property is to go away from you without any fault of yours, naturally you are not fond of those to whom it goes. But with Heathcote one forgets all these prejudices. He is so thoroughly nice, he is so affectionate. He has no

family of his own (unless you call his delicate brother a family), and anyone can see how he likes ladies' society. Mr. Mountford thinks as much of him as we do. I quite look forward to introducing him to our friends; and I hope he may get to be popular in the county, for now that we have made such friends with him, he will be often here I trust.'

Such was the excellent opinion his cousin's wife expressed of him. It is needless to say that her neighbours imputed motives to poor Mrs. Mountford, and jumped at the cause of her partiality. 'She means him to marry Rose,' everybody said; and some applauded her prudence; and some denounced her selfishness in sacrificing Rose to a man old enough to be her father; but, on the whole, the county approved both the man himself and the opportunity of making his acquaintance. He was asked to dinner at Meadowlands, which was all that could be desired for any visitor in the neighbourhood. The Mountfords felt that they had done their utmost for any guest of theirs when they had procured them this gratification. And Lord Meadowlands quite

‘took to’ Heathcote. This was the best thing that could happen to anyone new to the county, the sort of thing on which the other members of society congratulated each other when the neophyte was a favourite, taking each other into corners and saying: ‘He has been a great deal at the Castle,’ or ‘He has been taken up by Lord Meadowlands.’ Thus the reception given to the heir of entail was in every way satisfactory, and even Mr. Mountford himself got to like him. The only one who kept aloof was Anne, who was at this moment very much preoccupied with her own thoughts; but it was not from any dislike to the new member of the household. He had not fulfilled her expectations. But that most probably was not his fault. And, granting the utter want of delicate perception in him, and understanding of the rôle which ought to have been his in the circumstances, Anne, after a few days, came to think tolerably well of her new kinsman. He was intelligent: he could talk of things which the others rejected as nonsense or condemned as highflown. On the question of the cottages, for instance, he had

shown great good sense ; and on the whole, though with indifference, Anne conceded a general approval to him. But they did not draw together, or so at least the other members of the family thought. Rose monopolised him when he was in the drawing-room. She challenged him at every turn, as a very young and innocent girl may do, out of mere high spirits, without conscious coquetry at least : she contradicted him and defied him, and adopted his opinions and scoffed at them by turns, keeping him occupied, with an instinctive art which was quite artless, and meant ' fun ' more than anything serious. At all this pretty play Anne looked on without seeing it, having her head full of other things. And the mother looked on, half-afraid, half-disapproving (as being herself of a stricter school and older fashion), yet not sufficiently afraid or displeased to interfere ; while Heathcote himself was amused, and did not object to the kittenish sport of the pretty little girl, whose father (he said to himself) he might have been, so far as age went. But he kept an eye, notwithstanding, on ' the other girl,' whom he did not

understand. That she was 'engaged,' and yet not permitted to be spoken of as 'engaged'—that there was some mystery about her—was evident. A suspicion of a hidden story excites every observer. Heathcote wanted to find it out, as all of us would have done. As for himself, he was not incapable of higher sentiments, though Anne had easily set him down as being so : but his experiences had not been confined to one romantic episode, as she, in her youthful ignorance, had supposed. The story was true enough, but with a difference. The Italian princess was not a noble lady compelled to wed in her own rank and relinquish her young Englishman, as Mrs. Mountford had recounted it, but a poor girl of much homelier gentility, whose lot had been fixed long before Heathcote traversed her simple path, and who fulfilled that lot with a few tears but not very much reluctance, much more in the spirit of Keziah than of Anne. Heathcote himself looked back upon the little incident with a smile. He would have gone to the ends of the earth to serve her had she wanted his help, but he did not regret that Antonia

had not been his wife all these years. Perhaps he would have required a moment's reflection to think what anyone could mean who referred to this story. But even the fact that such an episode was of no special importance in his life would have been against him with Anne in the present state of her thoughts. She would not have allowed it as possible or right that a man should have gone beyond the simplicity of such an incident. In her experience love was as yet the first great fact, the one enlightener, awakener of existence. It had changed her own life from the foundation, nay, had given her an individual, separate life, as she fondly thought, such as, without this enchantment, no one could have. But Heathcote had lived a great deal longer, had seen a great deal more. He had been 'knocked about,' as people say. He had seen the futility of a great many things upon which simple people set their hopes; he had come to be not very solicitous about much which seems deeply important to youth. Thirty-five had worked upon him its usual influence. But of all this Anne knew nothing, and she put him aside as a

problem not worth solution, as a being whose deficiencies were deficiencies of nature. She was more interesting to him. She was the only one of the house who was not evident on the surface. And his interest was stimulated by natural curiosity. He wanted to know what the story was which the child-sister referred to so frankly, which the mother wanted to ignore. There was even a something in the intercourse between Anne and her father which caught his attention. They were on perfectly good terms—but what was it? He was a man who took things as they came, who did not feel a very profound interest in anything—save one thing. But this little mystery reflected in Anne's serious eyes, and pervading the house with a sense of something not apparent, roused the dormant sentiment more than he could have thought possible.

The one thing that interested Heathcote Mountford to the bottom of his heart was his young brother, for whom he had a tender, semi-parental passion, preferring his concerns above everything else in the world. It was this, indeed, which had

brought him to Mount with a proposal which he could not but feel that Mr. Mountford would grasp at. He had come to offer to his predecessor in the entail that they should join together and break it—a singular step for an heir in his position to take. But as yet he had said nothing about this chief object of his visit. When he formed the project it had not cost him much. What did he want with an estate and a big house to keep up, he had said to himself in the snugness of his bachelor's chambers, so much more comfortable than Mount, or any other such big barrack of a place could ever be made? He had already a shabby old house to which he went now and then to shoot, and which—because Edward (not to speak of himself) had been born in it, and their mother had died in it, as well as many generations of Edwards and Heathcotes in the past—could not be done away with, however melancholy and dismal it might get to be. But Mount had no associations for him. Why should not St. John's girls have it, as was just and natural? The Mountfords of Mount were not anything so very great that heaven and

earth should be moved to keep them up. Besides, he would not be of much use in keeping them up; he never meant to marry (not because of Antonia, but probably because of 'knocking about' and forgetting that any one thing in the world was more important than any other), and Edward was delicate, and there was no telling what the boy might do;—far better to have a good sum of money, to set that wayward fellow above the reach of trouble, and leave it to St. John's girls to provide for the race. No doubt they would do that fast enough. They would marry, and their children could take the name. Thus he had his plans all cut and dry before he reached Mount. But when he got there, either the reserve of Mr. Mountford's manner, or some certain charm in the place which he had not anticipated, deferred the execution of it. He thought it over and arranged all the details during each day's shooting, notwithstanding that the gamekeepers insisted all the time on discoursing with him upon the estate, and pointing out what should be done under a new reign which the present master did not care to have done; but in

the evening he was too tired (he said to himself) to open so important a subject ; and thus day after day went on. Perhaps the discourses even of the game-keepers, and their eagerness to point out to him the evils that were to be amended at presumably the not very distant period when a new monarch should reign, and the welcome he received from the people he met, and the success he had at Meadowlands, and the interest which he excited in the county, had something to do with the disinclination to open the subject which seemed to have crept upon him ; or probably it was only laziness. This was the reason which he assigned to himself—indolence of mind, which was one of his besetting sins he knew. But, anyhow, whatever was the cause, he had as yet said nothing on the subject. He had accepted all the allusions that were made to his future connection with the county, and the overtures of friendship ; and he had owned himself flattered by the attentions of Lord Meadowlands : everything had gone indeed precisely as things might have gone had he fully accepted his position as heir of the Mountfords. Nobody for a moment

doubted that position : and still he did nothing to undeceive them, nothing to show his real disinclination to assume the burden of the ownership of Mount. Was he really so disinclined to accept it? After this week of the new life his head seemed confused on the subject, and he was not quite so sure.

But all the same he felt instinctively that Anne would make a far better squire than he should. He had gone through the village with the girls, and he had seen how everything centred in Anne. Though there was (he thought) a certain severity in her, the village people evidently did not feel it. They were more at home with her than even with her little sister. The Rector came up to her in the street, and put his arm within hers, and led her away to see something which had to be done, with a mixture of authority and appeal which touched the looker-on. Mr. Ashley was old and feeble, and there was something pretty in the way in which he supported himself at once physically and morally on the young, slim, elastic strength of the girl, who was the natural born princess of the place. At the schools she was

supreme. Wherever she went, it was evidently recognised that she was the representative at once of law and of power. Heathcote, who had not been used to it, looked upon her with surprise and a wondering admiration. 'You are in great demand,' he said. 'You have a great deal to do. You seem to have the government of the place in your hands.'

'Papa is not so active as he used to be,' Anne said. 'Besides, there are so many little things which come more naturally to me.'

'You are princess regent,' he said: 'I see; you act for the king, but you are more than the king. A man could never do that.'

'Men can do a great deal more than women in everything,' said Anne, with decision.

'Oh! can they? I should not have said so; but no doubt you know best.'

'If they cannot, what is the meaning of everything that is said in the world, Mr. Heathcote? you would have to change the entire language. We are never supposed to be good for anything. What is life to us is supposed to be an amusement to you.'

‘This is a new light,’ said Heathcote, somewhat startled. He had no idea that it was poor Antonia, the mother of half a dozen children, who was in Anne’s mind all the time.

‘Anne, don’t! Mamma says you should never talk like that to gentlemen; they will think you go in for women’s rights and all sorts of horrible things. She doesn’t, cousin Heathcote. She only wants to make you stare.’

‘I think I go in for everybody’s rights; I don’t mind whether they are women or men,’ said Anne. ‘Mrs. Fisher, what is the matter? The children don’t come to school, and Johnny has left the choir. There must be some reason for all that.’

‘Miss Anne,’ said the woman, with a smirk and a curtsy, ‘Johnny’s been in the rectory kitchen learning to be a boy. Mr. Douglas, miss, that was stopping at the rectory, took a fancy to him, and old Simes is a-training of him. Mr. Douglas, that’s the gentleman—is going to have him at his house in town, Miss Anne. You knows him, Johnny says.’

At this Rose gave vent to a suppressed giggle,

and the woman smirked more broadly than ever. But these signs might not have caught the attention of Heathcote but for the violent flush which he saw overspread Anne's face. His attention was roused on the moment.

‘Mr. Douglas has been gone for some time,’ he heard Anne say. A note had got into her voice that had not been there before—a softness, a roundness, a melting of the tones. Mr. Douglas!—who was he? Heathcote said who was the fellow? within himself with an instinctive opposition. ‘The fellow’ had nothing whatever to do with him, yet he disliked him at once.

‘Yes, Miss Anne; but Johnny has been in the rectory kitchen a-training ever since the gentleman went away.’

Anne made the woman a little friendly sign with her hand and went on. She did not pursue her inquiries as officer of the school any more: she accepted the excuse, though it was no excuse; which showed, he said to himself with a smile, how efficient female officers of school boards would be. Perhaps

she was half humbled by this evidence of being too easily satisfied. She volunteered a profession of her faith.

‘I do not approve of too stringent measures: you ought not to set up one arbitrary rule; you ought to take the circumstances into consideration.’ All this was said with a little heat. ‘I suppose why school boards have been so unpopular where they exist is very much because of that.’

Again a little giggle escaped from the bosom of Rose; but it was quickly suppressed. She gave Heathcote a significant look, as Anne was stopped by some one else who wanted to speak to her. ‘That was the gentleman,’ Rose whispered, with mischievous delight.

Well, if it was the gentleman! Heathcote thought, he was a lucky fellow; but the idea of giving up Mount was from that moment less pleasant, he could scarcely tell why. He did not relish the notion of some fellow called Douglas, probably some Scotsman who would not part with his very ordinary name for a king’s ransom, coming into possession of

the old place. Who was Douglas? On the whole, Heathcote for the first time acknowledged to himself that there might be two sides to the question, and that there was something wrong and faithless in separating the old name of Mountford and the male heir from Mount.

Next day, however, by accident further light was thrown to him on this question. The principal post came in at noon, and it was the habit of the house that the letters which came by it should be ranged upon one of the tables in the hall, in little heaps, where their respective owners found them. Coming in to get his share of the budget, Heathcote found that Mr. Mountford was there before him. He had his letters in his left hand, but with his right had taken up another which lay on Anne's heap. He was balancing it in his fingers half-contemptuous, half-angry, when Heathcote, with the involuntary indiscretion which so often belongs to the innocent, knowing no reason why anything should be done in secret, paused behind him, and saw at a glance what he was about. It was not anything tragical: Mr.

Mountford had no intention of tampering with Anne's letter : but he held it up, and turned it over, and looked at it all round with a look of disgust on his countenance. By this time Heathcote had been awakened to the sense that he was prying into a domestic mystery, he who had no right to do so, and he hastened to gather his own letters from the table. Mrs. Mountford by this time had come in, on the same errand. Her husband held the letter up to her with an indignant 'humph!' 'Do you see? She is keeping it up in spite of all I have said.'

'I don't want to see it,' said the stepmother, nervously ; 'put it down. I have nothing to do with Anne's letters, papa !'

And then a sort of sensation spread through the room, he could not tell what, and Heathcote became aware that Anne herself had come in. She walked straight to the table where her father stood, still with her letter in his hand. She recognised it in his hand with a sudden flush of consciousness, and stood facing him, saying nothing, pale now, but with courage, not fear.

‘This is for you apparently, Anne; you are keeping up the correspondence whatever I may say.’

‘Yes, papa, I am keeping it up.’ She put out her hand and took the letter. She made no explanation or excuse; but went away with it, slowly, with a sort of formal dignity. It was a strange little scene. The observer seemed to see the story rising like a picture before him—as Anne had thought she saw his story—but more distinctly as being more near. He was more interested than he could say. He had no right to inquire into what was so distinctly a family secret. If she only would have confided in him, told him how it was!—but that he had no right to expect. It made a visible commotion in the house for the rest of the day. Little signs of agitation were visible, signs which without this elucidation would only have puzzled, would have conveyed no enlightenment to his mind. Anne did not appear at lunch. She had gone, it was said, to the village, and no doubt had stopped to luncheon with the Woodheads. And Mr. Mountford was gloomy and absent, yet at the same time more alert

than usual. 'I am going to ride over to Hunston this afternoon,' he announced. 'Perhaps you would like to go with me, Heathcote, and see the place?'

'What are you going to do at Hunston, papa? Let me come with you too: let us all go together,' said Rose.

'I am going to see Mr. Loseby,' her father said; and this, though it had no effect upon Rose, made her mother start slightly, and cast an anxious look towards the head of the table.

'Do you think, St. John, it is a good day to go to Hunston? It is very damp, and I am sure you will make your cold worse.'

Mrs. Mountford was not the soul of generosity: but she was far from being unjust or cruel. She was afraid of what her husband might be going to do, even should it be for the advantage of Rose.

'I think I can manage to take care of my cold,' he said.

'But that is just what gentlemen never do. Don't go to-day, St. John. Wait till it is drier and brighter;' she even got up from her chair and

went round to him and put her hand on his shoulder. 'Wait till you have had time to think.'

'I have taken too much time to think,' he said crossly, turning away his head and rising from the table. 'Heathcote, if you would like to come with me, I shall be ready in half-an-hour.'

'What is it, mamma?' said Rose, half frightened too, as her father went out of the room. Mrs. Mountford—the spectator always thought the better of her for it—fell a-crying, without being able to restrain herself, half in real distress, half in nervous excitement. 'Oh, Mr. Heathcote, if you can do anything to smoothe him down, do so; I am afraid he is going to—to tamper with his will!' she cried.

CHAPTER XV.

TAMPERING WITH A LAWYER.

THE road to Hunston was a pleasant road. They went through the park first, which was in all the glory of autumn colouring, the oaks and the beeches a wonder to see, and even the slim elms all golden standing up against a blue afternoon sky, in which already there began to appear faint beginnings of purple and crimson as the sun got westward; and after that the road ran between other parks, and more and more wealth of russet or of golden foliage. But Mr. Mountford was not a very entertaining companion. Heathcote when he was 'at home' was in very good society—in society, that is to say, which was agreeable, where there was much talk and great freedom of intercourse, and since he had been at Mount he had found pleasure in the society of the

girls, one of whom amused him, while one interested him. Mr. Mountford, however, did neither the one nor the other. He indicated the different houses with his riding-whip as they passed.

‘That’s Newton-Magna. The Newtons once contested the county with us. My grandfather married a Newton—they are, therefore, connections. This is where old Lady Prayrey Poule lives. She has just made a ridiculous marriage, of which everybody is talking. I don’t know who the man is. There is Meadowlands to the right, and that’s young Lassell’s place, whom I suppose you have heard of.’

This was the style of his conversation. Sometimes he varied it by giving his kinsman an account of the value of the livings and the goodness of the land.

‘It is worth so much an acre on this side of the river, and not half on the other side. The land up my way is generally good, and the livings are excellent. In my parish the living has always been held by a younger son, but naturally there has been no younger son. Ah! you think that Edward;—well,

if I had known more of Edward, I might perhaps—but he is quite young ; there is plenty of time.'

Between the intervals, however, when he was not engaged with these local details, Mr. Mountford had not much to say. He was not brilliant in himself, and he was preoccupied. He had all the air of a man who was going, as his wife said, to tamper with his will. When his companion spoke to him he gave short answers : his thoughts were somewhere else. When they approached the town he became still more brief in his indications.

'The church is considered fine, I believe, and the High Street is a nice street. I am going to Loseby's, who is my lawyer. He has had all the Mount affairs in his hands since ever I can remember, and much longer—he and his father before him. He'll like to make your acquaintance ; but in the meantime I have some business with him. Perhaps you would like to look about the town a little.'

Heathcote said he would like to look about the town, and Mr. Mountford, evidently gathering himself up with an effort, buttoned up a button which

had come undone of his coat, and with a very determined air strode into the lawyer's office. It was part of a tall red brick house, which formed an important feature in the scene, a house with many rows of windows, long and narrow, which twinkled in the setting sun. In Heathcote's mind there was a great deal of mingled curiosity and sympathy. He would have liked to know what was going to happen, to be behind Mr. Loseby's curtains, or in some cupboard full of parchments. There could be no doubt that something affecting Anne's future was in the wind. He laughed at himself, after a moment, to think how much importance, how much gravity he was attaching to it. After all, he said to himself, as Cosmo had done before, tyrannical fathers are a thing of the past—nobody cuts off a child now-a-days with a shilling. No doubt all Mr. Mountford meant was to tie up her money so that no worthless fellow of a husband could get at it. But, though he felt that this was the only reasonable interpretation of Mr. Mountford's mission, yet the various little scenes he had been a witness to made

an impression upon his mind in spite of himself. Anne standing grave and simple, facing her father, holding out her hand for her letter, saying, 'Yes, I keep it up'—was it undutiful of the girl? and the father's stern displeasure and the mother's (or step-mother was it? all the more credit to her) excitement and distress. To be sure a family quarrel always threw a house into agitation, even where no great harm was to be looked for. No doubt it was undutiful of the girl. After all, if a parent is not to have influence on that point, where is the use of him? And no doubt she had chosen a man unworthy of her, or such a fuss never would have been made. Heathcote was not a parent, but still he had in some respects the responsibilities of a parent. Edward was delicate—he was not strong enough to fight his way against the world; but he was not amiable, the quality which ought to belong to all delicate and weakly persons, and which makes up for so many deficiencies. He had strong passions in his weak body. He had already got into various scrapes, out of which his brother had been called

upon to draw him. Heathcote had a letter in his pocket now which had given him a great deal of thought. It had drawn him back to his former conviction that Edward's affairs were the most important in the world. It was not in his power by himself to do all that Edward wanted, to secure the boy's comfort, so far as that was possible. He must speak to Mr. Mountford on the ride home. It was not a thing to be neglected any longer. This was the chief thing in his mind as he walked about Hunston, looking into the old church and surveying all the shops. He 'made acquaintance,' as his kinsman had bidden him, with the quiet little county town, with a curious mingling of ideas in his mind. In the first place, he could not but think how many generations of Mountfords had trodden this pavement—ladies in farthingales and men in periwigs, bucks of the Regency, sober politicians of the period of Reform ; and by-and-by it would be his own turn—he too in his day would ride in on a steady-going old cob, like St. John Mountford, or drive in the family coach to see his lawyer and his banker and

do his business. But no—he contradicted himself with a little confusion—no, this was just what he was not to do. For the moment he had forgotten his own purpose, the object that brought him to the old home of the race—which was to sever himself from it. No, after all, he said to himself with a smile, there was not very much to give up; the pleasure of riding into the county town and receiving the respectful salutations of all the shopkeepers: that was not much. The Albany was a better place to live in, Piccadilly was a little more entertaining than the High Street. Nevertheless, it was certain that Heathcote felt a pinch of regret when he remembered that the glories of Mount and the greetings of Hunston were not to be his. He laughed, but he did not like it. All the more was it essential that this step should be taken without delay.

Heathcote examined everything there was to see in the place, and walked three or four times from one end to another of the High Street, awakening the greatest curiosity in the bosoms of all the shop-

keepers, and a flutter of futile hope and expectation behind the bonnets in the milliner's windows, where Miss Trimmin's niece took this novel apparition for the hero of her last romance. That a gentleman should see a face at a window, and walk up and down High Street for an hour for the chance of another glimpse of it, was not at all an out-of-the-way event for the readers of the 'Family Herald'—much more likely than that he should be waiting for Mr. Mountford. When, however, the master of Mount appeared at last, he bore all the outward signs of a prolonged combat. His hair was rubbed up off his forehead, so that his hat rested upon the ends of it, not upon his head. His eyes were agitated and rolling. Mr. Loseby, a little stout old gentleman, with a large watchchain and seals, came out after him with similar signs of commotion. The family lawyer was red and breathless, while his companion was choked and pale. They came out together with that air of formal politeness which follows a quarrel, to the door.

'Heathcote,' Mr. Mountford called, holding up

his hand ; ‘ this is Mr. Loseby, whose name must be known to you as the man of business of my family for several generations. We have always had the utmost confidence in them, as they have always done their best for us.’

‘ After such an introduction,’ said Mr. Loseby, ‘ I ought to make a bow and hope for the continuance of custom and favour, which my best efforts will be exerted to deserve.’

And then there was a forced laugh, in which some of the resentment of the two elder men fortunately blew off. They stood together in a circle at the door of the Queen Anne Mansion. Mr. Loseby only wore no hat. He was bald and round and shining all over, a man to whom genial good-humour was evidently more natural than the air of heat and irritation which was upon him now.

‘ I hope we are to see something of Mr. Heathcote Mountford in the county after this. I hope you mean to make acquaintance with your neighbours, and feel yourself at home. The name of Mountford is a passport here.’ (‘ Though I don’t

know why it should be—obstinate asses! pig-headed fools!’ the puffing little lawyer said to himself.)

‘I am here on false pretences,’ Heathcote said. ‘I fear I have been taking in my cousin and his family and all their excellent friends. I may as well tell it at last. My real object in coming was rather to sever myself from the county than to draw the bond tighter——’

‘What do you mean?’ said Mr. Mountford, abruptly.

‘Forgive me for saying nothing about it before. This is a good opportunity now, when we have Mr. Loseby’s assistance. I came with the express intention of making a proposal to you, St. John, about the entail.’

Mr. Loseby looked first at the speaker and then at his client, forming his lips into a round, as if he would have said, ‘Whew-w! This was something altogether new.’

Mr. Mountford took no notice of his look; he said, still more abruptly than before, ‘What about the entail?’

‘Pardon me if I say it,’ said Heathcote. ‘Mount is quite new to me ; it does not attract me’ (what a fib that was, he felt in his heart). ‘I shall never marry. I have suffered the time for forming new connections to pass, and my brother has indifferent health and no liking for country life. On the other hand, it is natural that my cousin should prefer to be succeeded by his own family. What I have to say is that I am very willing, if you like it, to join with you in breaking the entail.’

‘In breaking the entail!’ Mr. Loseby’s mouth grew rounder and rounder ; he seemed to be forming one whistle after another, which came to nothing. But he did not take time to express his own surprise or his own opinion, so much was he occupied in watching the effect of this announcement upon Mr. Mountford. The latter was dumbfounded ; he stood and stared at the speaker with blank dismay and consternation. But it did not apparently produce any livelier or happier impression upon his mind. He was not eager to snatch at the opportunity of putting his own child in his place.

‘You must be cracked,’ he said ; ‘do you know how long the Mountfords have been at Mount?—the oldest house in the county, and, if not the richest or the largest, in some ways by far the most interesting. Heathcote, there must be something under this. If you are pressed for money, if there is anything you want to do, I dare say Loseby will manage it for you.’

‘I will do anything that is in reason,’ Mr. Loseby said, not without a little emphasis which brought a tinge of red on his client’s countenance. They could not yet give up their duel with each other, however important the other communication might be.

‘Heathcote Mountford will not ask you to do anything out of reason,’ cried the other ; ‘and in case he should exceed that limit, here am I ready to be his security. No, we must not hear anything more about breaking the entail.’

‘I am afraid you must consent to hear something more,’ said Heathcote, half pleased, half angry ; ‘it is not a sudden fancy. I have considered it

thoroughly; there are numberless advantages, and, so far as I can see, nothing of substantial weight to be brought forward on the other side.'

'Oh come, this is too much!' cried the lawyer, moved to professional interest; 'nothing on the other side! But this is not a place to discuss so serious a subject. Step into my office, and let us have it out.'

I have had enough of your office for one day,' said Mr. Mountford (at which the lawyer barely restrained a chuckle); 'I have had quite enough of your office, I'll go and see about the horses. If there is anything wrong, Heathcote, have it out, as he says, with Loseby. He'll make it all right for you. He may not always be satisfactory to deal with for those who prefer to judge for themselves sometimes; but if it is anything you want, he'll give you trustworthy advice.'

'Thank you for your good word, squire,' said the lawyer, laughing and putting his hand to his forehead with the duck of a country bumpkin.

‘Now take a seat,’ he added, as he led the stranger into a trim wainscoted room with cupboards hid behind half the panels, and the secrets of half the families of the county in them, ‘and let us talk this over. I cannot understand why Mountford does not jump at it (yes, I do; I *can* understand, now), but why you should wish to do it! Pardon me, if I say on your side it is mere madness. What good can it do you? If you want money, as your cousin says, I can get you as much money as you like—at least,’ he said, pausing to survey him with dubious looks, as if with a momentary apprehension that his new acquaintance might turn out a sporting man in difficulties or something of that disreputable kind, ‘almost as much as you like.’

‘I do want money,’ Heathcote said, ‘but I do not want it unless I give a fair equivalent. The entail is of no advantage to me. I live in London. I do not want to keep up the faded glories of a place in the country.’

‘Faded glories! We thought, on the contrary, everything was as fine as in the Queen’s palace, and

all new,' cried Mr. Loseby, with his favourite restrained whistle of comic surprise.

'I have a place of my own,' said Heathcote, 'a poor one, I allow, but enough for my requirements. I am not a marrying man, and very likely, God knows, to be the last of my family; what do I want with an entailed estate?'

'But that is so easily remedied,' said the lawyer. 'Marry—marry, my dear sir! and you will no longer be the last of your family, and will very soon learn to appreciate an entailed estate. By ——!' cried Mr. Loseby, rubbing his hands. He would not say 'By Jove!' or even 'By George!' or anything of the sort, which would have been unbecoming his years and dignity; but when things were too many for him, he swore 'By ——!' and was refreshed. 'I could tell you a thing to do,' cried the lawyer, with a chuckle, 'that would save the family from a great deal of trouble. What do you think that obstinate—I beg your pardon, Mr. Heathcote, he and I are old friends, we say what we please to each other?—what do you suppose he has been doing here?—

trying to force me, against all the teachings of reason, to alter his will—to cut off that fine girl, that delightful creature, Anne.'

'Mr. Loseby, I don't suppose this is a thing which I am intended to know.'

'You will know, sooner or later, if he carries it out,' cried the lawyer; but you are right, I have no business to betray my client's affairs. But, look here now,' he said, bending across the table, leaning on both his elbows to look insinuatingly, coaxingly in Heathcote's face, 'look here now! I never saw you before, Mr. Heathcote, but your name is as familiar to me as my a, b, c, and I am a very old family friend, as I may say, as well as their man of business. Look here now. You are a very personable man, and not a bit too old for her, and a most suitable match in every way. Why shouldn't you make up to Anne? Hear me out, and don't flare up. Bless you, I am not a stranger, nor a mere impudent country attorney, as perhaps you are thinking. I knew them all before they were born. Anne is perhaps a little serious, you will think, a little high-

saluting. But nobody knows till they *do* know her what a fine creature she is. Anne Mountford is a wife for a king. And here she's got entangled with some fellow whom nobody knows, and Mountford of course refuses his consent. But she is not the girl to be bullied or treated with severity. Why couldn't you go in now and try for Anne? You are not to be supposed to know anything about it; it would all be innocence in you; and who knows that she mightn't be glad of the chance of slipping out of the other, though she won't give in to threats. Won't you think of it? Won't you think of it? I don't know the man, if he were a prince, that might not be proud of Anne.'

All this Heathcote listened to with very strange sensations. He was angry, amused, touched by the enthusiasm of the little round shining man, who thus entreated him, with every kind of eloquence he was capable of, his eyes and hands and his whole frame twisting into gestures of persuasion. Heathcote was disposed to laugh, but he was still more disposed to resent this familiar employment of his cousin's name.

‘Are you aware that I have no right to be brought into the family secrets, to have their affairs thus revealed to me?’ he said. ‘Stop—nor to hear the name of a young lady for whom I have so much respect treated so. Allowing that I need not resent it as a liberty, since you are an older friend than I am, still you must see that between you and me, strangers to each other——’

‘Yes, yes, I see,’ said Mr. Loseby, ‘you are quite right. I see. I thought perhaps exceptional circumstances might warrant—but never mind. I am wrong; I see it. Well, then, about this entail business. Don’t you see this is why our friend does not jump at it? Little Rose could never be Mountford of Mount. Anne would make a noble squire, but it is out of the question for her sister. Keep to your entail, Mr. Heathcote, and if I can be of use to you, I will do my best. If it’s a money difficulty we’ll tide it over for you. Let me know all the circumstances, and I will do my best.’

‘I cannot give up my project all at once,’ Heathcote said, hesitating.

‘I would if I were you. It would harm yourself and do good to nobody. I certainly would if I were you,’ said the lawyer, getting up and accompanying him to the door.

‘I must exercise my own judgment on that point, Mr. Loseby.’

‘Certainly, certainly, certainly, Mr. Heathcote Mountford! You will all exercise your judgment, you will all do what seems good in your own eyes. I know what the Mountfords are from generation to generation. If it had not been that St. John Mountford had the luck to take a fancy to a rich woman for his first wife, what would the place have been by this time? But that is a chance that doesn’t happen once in a century. And now, when here is another—the finest chance! with openings for such a settlement! But never mind; never mind; of course you will all take your own way.’

‘I hope you have brought him to reason, Loseby,’ said Mr. Mountford, from the back of his cob, as they emerged again into the street.

‘All arrangements about property which are

against nature are against reason,' said the little lawyer, sententiously. 'Good afternoon, gentlemen. When you go in for these fancy arrangements, it is some sort of a poetical personage you want, and not a lawyer. I wish you a pleasant ride.'

'He is a character,' said Mr. Mountford, with a short laugh, as they rode away. But that laugh was the only sound of the lighter sort that broke the gravity of their silent companionship, as their horses' hoofs clattered over the stones of the little town, and came out upon the long silence of the country road now falling rapidly into twilight. 'We are a little late,' Mr. Mountford said, half-an-hour after. As for Heathcote, he did not feel, any more than his kinsman, in a humour for talk. What he had heard, though he had protested against hearing it, dwelt in his mind, and the somewhat morose gravity of the other infected him in spite of himself. What had St. John Mountford, who was in reality a commonplace, good enough sort of man, been doing to warrant so gloomy an aspect? Had he been turning the fortunes of the family upside

down and spoiling the life of the daughter he loved best? or was it a mere exhibition of sulkiness consequent upon the quarrel with the lawyer and the opposition he had encountered? Heathcote had known nothing about these Mountfords a week ago, and now how closely he felt himself knitted up in their affairs, whether he continued to be formally connected with them or not! As he rode along in silence by his kinsman's side, he could not help thinking of the catastrophe which might be coming; that 'fine creature' Anne—the little old bald shining lawyer had grown eloquent when he spoke of her. And though she seemed a little severe to Heathcote, he could not but acknowledge to himself that she had always interested him. Rose? oh, Rose was a pretty little thing, a child, a nobody; it did not matter very much what happened to her; but if it should happen that Anne's life was being changed, the brightness taken out of it, and all those advantages which seem so natural and becoming transferred from her to the profit of Rose? Heathcote felt that this would be a wrong to move heaven

and earth ; but it was not a subject in which he, a stranger, had any right to interfere. As he looked at the dark muffled figure of her father by his side against the faint crimson which still lingered in the west, he could scarcely help chafing at the thought that, though he was their nearest relation, he was still a stranger, and must not, dared not say a word. And what kind of fellow, he said to himself, in natural indignation, could it be who was wilfully leading Anne into the wilderness, accepting her sacrifice of that which was the very foundation of her life ? Perhaps had he himself been the man who loved Anne he would have seen things in a different light ; but from his present point of view his mind was full of angry wrath and contempt for the unknown who could let a girl inexperienced in the world give up so much for him. He was a nobody, they said. He must be a poor sort of creature, Heathcote, on these very insufficient grounds, decided in his heart.

It was a beautiful clear October night, with frost in the air, the stars shining every minute more and

more brightly, the crimson disappearing, even the last golden afterglow fading into palest yellow in the west, and all the great vault of sky darkening to perfect night. The horses' hoofs beat upon the long, safe, well-kept road, bordered by long monotonous walls and clouds of trees, from which darkness had stolen their colour—a perfectly safe, tranquil country road, with a peaceful house at the end, already lighting all its windows, preparing its table for the wayfarers. Yet there was something of the gloom of a tragedy in the dark figure wrapped in silence, pondering one could not tell what plans of mischief, and wrathful gloomy intentions, which rode by Heathcote's side, without a word, along all those miles of darkling way.

CHAPTER XVI.

GOOD ADVICE.

THE dinner to which the family sat down after this ride somewhat alarmed the stranger-relative who so suddenly found himself mixed up in their affairs. He thought it must necessarily be a constrained and uncomfortable meal. But this did not turn out to be the case. Anne knew nothing at all about what her father had been doing, and from Rose's light nature the half-comprehended scene at luncheon, when her mother had wept and her father's face had been like a thundercloud, had already faded away. These two unconscious members of the party kept the tide of affairs in flow. They talked as usual—Anne even more than usual, as one who is unaware of the critical point at which, to the knowledge of all around, he or she is standing, so often does. She gave even a little

more information than was called for about her visit to the Woodheads, being in her own mind half ashamed of her cowardice in staying away after the scene of the morning. On the whole she was glad, she persuaded herself, of the scene of the morning. It had placed her position beyond doubt. There had seemed no occasion to make any statement to her father as to the correspondence which he had not forbidden or indeed referred to. He had bidden her give up her lover, and she had refused ; but he had said nothing about the lover's letters, though these followed as a matter of course. And now it was well that he should know the exact position of affairs. She had been greatly agitated at the moment, but soon composed herself. And in her desire to show that she was satisfied, not grieved by what had happened, Anne was more than usually cheerful and communicative in her talk.

‘ Fanny is very happy about her brother who is coming home from India. He is to be here only six weeks ; but he does not grudge the long journey : and they are all so happy.’

‘He is a fool for his pains,’ growled Mr. Mountford from the head of the table. ‘I don’t know what our young men men are coming to. What right has he to such a luxury? It will cost him a hundred pounds at the least. Six weeks—he has not been gone as many years.’

‘Four years—that is a long time when people are fond of each other,’ said Anne, with a scarcely perceptible smile. Every individual at table instantly thought of the absent lover.

‘She is thinking that I will be dead and gone in four years, and she will be free,’ the angry father said to himself, with a vindictive sense that he was justified in the punishment he meant to inflict upon her. But Anne, indeed, was thinking of nothing of the kind, only with a visionary regret that in her own family there was no one to come eager over sea and land to be longed and prayed for with Fanny Woodhead’s anxious sisterly motherly passion. This was far, very far from the imagination of the others as a motive likely to produce such a sigh.

‘A brother from India is always anxiously looked

for,' said Mrs. Mountford, stepping in with that half-compunctious readiness to succour Anne which the knowledge of this day's proceedings had produced in her. She did not, in fact, know what these proceedings had been, and they were in no way her fault. But still she felt a compunction. 'They always bring such quantities of things with them,' she added. 'An Indian box is the most delightful thing to open. I had a brother in India, too——'

'I wish we had,' said Rose, with a pout. Heathcote had been preoccupied: he had not been so 'attentive' as usual: and she wished for a brother instantly, 'just to spite him,' she said to herself.

'Fanny is not thinking of the presents; but Rose, consider you are interested in it, too—that is another man for your dance.'

Rose clapped her hands. 'We are looking up,' she said. 'Twenty men from Sandhurst, and six from Meadowlands, and Lady Prayrey Poule's husband, and Fred Woodhead and Willie Ashley—for of course Willie is coming——'

'A dance at this time of the year is folly,' said

Mr. Mountford ; ‘even in summer it is bad enough ; but the only time of the year for entertainments in the country is when you have warm weather and short nights.’

‘It was because of Cousin Heathcote, papa. It is not often we have a man, a real relation, staying at Mount.’

‘Heathcote ! oh, so it is for your sake, Heathcote ? I did not know that dancing was an attribute of reasonable beings after thirty,’ Mr. Mountford said.

Then it was Anne who came to Heathcote’s aid. ‘You are not afraid of seeming frivolous ?’ she said, giving him the kindest look he had yet seen in her eyes ; and his heart was touched by it : he had not known that Anne’s eyes had been so fine—‘and it will please everybody. The county requires to be stirred up now and then. We like to have something to talk about, to say, “Are you going to the So-and-so’s on the 25th ?”’

‘An admirable reason certainly for trouble and expense. If you were electioneering, it might be reasonable ; but I presume your woman’s rights are

not so advanced yet as that. Miss Anne Mountford can't stand for the county !'

'I don't think she is likely to try, father,' said Anne, 'whatever might be the rights—or wrongs.'

'You must not think, Mr. Heathcote,' said Mrs. Mountford anxiously, 'that Anne has anything to say to women's rights.' She is far too sensible. She has her own ways of thinking, but she is neither absurd nor strong-minded——'

'I hope you do not think me weak-minded, mamma,' Anne said, with a soft laugh.

And then little more was said. Mr. Mountford half rose and mumbled that grace after meat which leaves out all the more ethereal part of the repast as, we suppose, a kind of uncovenanted mercies for which no thanks are to be uttered ; and after a while the ladies left the room. It was cold, but the whole frosty world outside lay enchanted under the whitening of the moon. The girls caught up fur cloaks and shawls as they went through the hall, and stepped outside involuntarily. The sky was intensely blue ; the clouds piled high in snowy masses, the

moon sailing serenely across the great expanse, veiling herself lightly here and there with a film of vapour which the wind had detached from the cloud-mountains. These filmy fragments were floating across the sky at extraordinary speed, and the wind was rising, whirling down showers of leaves. The commotion among the trees, the sound of the wind, the rapid flight of the clouds, all chimed in with Anne's mood. She took hold of her sister's arm with gentle force. 'Stay a little, Rose—it is all quiet inside, and here there is so much going on : it is louder than one's thoughts,' Anne said.

'What do you mean by being louder than your thoughts? Your thoughts are not loud at all—not mine at least : and I don't like those dead leaves all blowing into my face ; they feel like things touching you. I think I shall go in, Anne.'

'Not yet, dear. I like it : it occupies one in spite of one's self. The lawn will be all yellow to-morrow with scattered gold.'

'You mean with scattered leaves ; of course it will,' said Rose. 'When the wind is high like this

it brings the leaves down like anything. The lime trees will be stripped, and it is a pity, for they were pretty. Everything is pretty this year. Papa has been to Hunston,' she said, abruptly, looking Anne in the face; but it was very difficult even for Rose's keen little eyes to distinguish in the moonlight whether or not Anne *knew*.

Anne took very little notice of this bit of news. 'So Saymore told me. Did Mr. Heathcote see the church, I wonder? I hope some one told him how fine it was, and that there were some Mountford monuments.'

'Do you know what papa was doing in Hunston, Anne? He went to see Mr. Loseby. Mamma made quite a fuss when he went away. She would not tell me what it was. Perhaps she did not know herself. She often gets into quite a state about things she doesn't know. Can you tell me what papa could want with Mr. Loseby? you can see for yourself how cross he is now he has come back.'

'With Mr. Loseby? no, I cannot tell you, Rose.' Anne heard the news with a little thrill of excite-

ment. It was rarely that Mr. Mountford went so far ; very rarely that he did anything which, through his wife, or Saymore, or Rose herself, did not find its way to the knowledge of the entire household. Anne connected the incident of the morning with this recent expedition, and her heart beat faster in her breast. Well : she was prepared ; she had counted the cost. If she was to be disinherited, that could be borne—but not to be untrue.

‘That means you will not tell me, Anne. I wonder why I should always be the last to know. For all anyone can tell, it may just be of as much consequence to me as to you, if he went to tamper with his will, as mamma said. What do you call tampering with a will? I don’t see,’ cried Rose, indignantly, ‘why I should always be supposed too young to know. Most likely it is of just as much consequence to me as to you.’

‘Rose,’ cried her mother, from the window, ‘come in—come in at once ! How can you keep that child out in the cold, Anne, when you know what a delicate throat she has?’ Then Mrs.

Mountford gave an audible shiver and shut down the window hastily; for it was very cold.

‘I have nothing to tell you, dear,’ Anne said gently. ‘But you are quite right; if there is any change made, it will be quite as important to you as to me: only you must not ask me about it, for my father does not take me into his confidence, and I don’t know.’

‘You don’t want to tell me!’ said the girl; but this time Mrs. Mountford knocked loudly on the window, and Rose was not sufficiently emancipated to neglect the second summons. Anne walked with her sister to the door, but then came back again to the sheltered walk under the windows. It was a melancholy hour when one was alone. The yellow leaves came down in showers flying on the wind. The clouds pursued each other over the sky. The great masses of vapours behind the wind began to invade the frosty blue; yet still the moon held on serenely, though her light was more and more interrupted by sudden blanks of shadow. Anne had no inclination to go into the quiet of the drawing-

room, the needlework, and Mrs. Mountford's little lectures, and perhaps the half-heard chattering with which Rose amused and held possession of her cousin. To her, whose happier life was hidden in the distance, it was more congenial to stay out here, among the flying winds and falling leaves. If it was so that Fortune was forsaking her ; if her father had carried out his threat, and she was now penniless, with nothing but herself to take to Cosmo, what change would this make in her future life ? Would *he* mind ? What would he say ? Anne had no personal experience at all, though she was so serious and so deeply learned in the troubles at least of village life. As she asked herself these questions, a smile crept about her lips in spite of her. She did not mean to smile. She meant to enquire very gravely : would he mind ? what would he say ? but the smile came without her knowledge. What could he say but one thing ? If it had been another man, there might have been doubts and hesitations—but Cosmo ! The mile stole to the corners of her mouth—a melting softness came into her heart. How

little need was there to question! Did not she *know*?

Her thoughts were so full of this that she did not hear another foot on the gravel, and when Heathcote spoke she awakened with a start, and came down out of that lofty hermitage of her thoughts with little satisfaction; but when he said something of the beauty of the night and the fascination of all those voices of the wind and woods, Anne, whether willingly or not, felt herself compelled to be civil. She came down from her abstraction, admitting, politely, that the night was fine. 'But,' she said, 'it is very cold, and the wind is rising every moment; I was thinking of going in.'

'I wonder if you would wait for a few minutes, Miss Mountford, and hear something I have to say.'

'Certainly,' Anne said; but she was surprised; and now that it was no longer her own will which kept her here, the wind all at once became very boisterous, and the 'silver lights and darks' dreary. 'Do you know we have a ghost belonging to us?'

she said. 'She haunts that lime avenue. We ought to see her to-night.'

'We have so little time for ghosts,' said Heathcote, almost fretfully; and then he added, 'Miss Mountford, I came to Mount on a special mission. Will you let me tell you what it was? I came to offer your father my co-operation in breaking the entail.'

'Breaking the entail!' the idea was so surprising that all who heard it received it with the same exclamation. As for Anne, she did more: she cast one rapid involuntary glance around her upon the house with all its lights, the familiar garden, the waving clouds of trees. In her heart she felt as if a sharp arrow of possible delight, despair, she knew not which, struck her keenly to the core. It was only for a moment. Then she drew a long breath and said, 'You bewilder me altogether; break the entail—why should you? I cannot comprehend it. Pardon me, it is as if the Prince of Wales said he would not have the crown. Mount is England to us Mountfords. I cannot understand what you mean.'

Heathcote thought he understood very well what *she* meant. He understood her look. Everything round was dear to her. Her first thought had been—Mount! to be ours still, ours always! But what did *ours* mean? Did she think of herself as heiress and mistress, or of—someone else? This pricked him at the heart, as she had been pricked by a different sentiment, by the thought that she had no longer the first interest in this piece of news; but there was no reason whatever for keen feeling in his case. What did it matter to him who had it? He did not want it. He cleared his throat to get rid of that involuntary impatience and annoyance. ‘It is not very difficult to understand,’ he said. ‘Mount is not to me what it is to you; I have only been here once before. My interests are elsewhere.’

Anne bowed gravely. They did not know each other well enough to permit of more confidential disclosures. She did not feel sufficient interest to ask, he thought; and she had no right to pry into his private concerns, Anne said to herself. Then

there was a pause: which she broke quite unexpectedly with one of those impulses which were so unlike Anne's external aspect, and yet so entirely in harmony with herself.

‘This makes my heart beat,’ she said, ‘the idea that Mount might be altogether ours—our home in the future as well as in the past; but at the same time, forgive me, it gives me a little pain to think that there is a Mountford, and he the heir, who thinks so little of Mount. It seems a slight to the place. I grudge that you should give it up, though it is delightful to think that we may have it; which is absurd, of course—like so many other things.’

‘Do you know,’ he said, ‘there is a great deal of the same sort of feeling in my own mind. I can't care for Mount, can I? I have not seen it for fifteen years; I was a boy then; now I am middle-aged, and don't care much for anything. But yet I too grudge that I should care for it so little; that I should be so willing to part with it. The feeling is absurd, as you say. If you could have it, Miss

Mountford, I should surmount that feeling easily : I should rejoice in the substitution——’

‘And why should not I have it?’ cried Anne quickly, turning upon him. Then she paused and laughed, though with constraint, and begged his pardon. ‘I don’t quite know what you mean,’ she said, ‘or what you know.’

‘Miss Mountford, having said so much to you, may I say a little more? I am one of your nearest relatives, and I am a great deal older than you are. There is some question which divides you from your father. I do not ask nor pretend to divine what it is. You are not agreed—and for this reason he thinks little of my proposal, and does not care to secure the reversion of his own property, the house which, in other circumstances, he would have desired to leave in your possession. I think, so far as I have gone, this is the state of the case?’

‘Well!’ She neither contradicted him nor consented to what he had said, but stood in the fitful moonlight, blown about by the wind, holding her

cloak closely round her, and looking at him between the light and gloom.

‘Pardon me,’ he said, ‘I have no right whatever to interfere : but—if you could bend your will to his—if you could humour him as long as his life lasts : your father is becoming an old man. Miss Mountford, you would not need perhaps to make this sacrifice for very long.’

She clasped her hands with impatient alarm, stopping him abruptly—‘Is my father ill ? Is there anything you know of that we do not know ?’

‘Nothing whatever. I only know his age, no more. Could you not yield to him, subdue your will to his ? You are young, and you have plenty of time to wait. Believe me, the happiness that will not bear to be waited for is scarcely worth having. I have no right to say a word—I do not understand the circumstances—actually I *know* nothing about them. But if you could yield to him, humour him for a time——’

‘Pretend to obey him while he lived,’ Anne said, in a low voice, ‘in order that I may be able to cheat

him when he is gone : that is a strange thing to recommend to me.'

'There is no question of cheating him. What I mean is, that if you would submit to him ; give him the pleasure of feeling himself obeyed in the end of his life——'

'I owe my father obedience at all times ; but there are surely distinctions. Will you tell me why you say this to me?'

'I cannot tell you why : only that there is something going on which will tell against you : sincerely, I do not know what it is. I do not want to counsel you to anything false, and I scarcely know what I am advising you to do. It is only, Miss Mountford, while you can—if you can—to submit to him : or even, if no better can be, *seem* to submit to him. Submit to him while he lives. This may be a caprice on his part—no more : but at the same time it may affect your whole life.'

Anne stood for a moment irresolute, not knowing what to say. The night favoured her and the dark. She could speak with less embarrassment

than if the daylight had been betraying her every look and change of aspect. 'Mr. Heathcote, I thank you for taking so much interest in me,' she said.

'I take the greatest interest in you, Miss Mountford; but in the meantime I would say the same to anyone so young. Things are going on which will injure you for your life. If you can by your submission avert these ills, and make him happier—even for a time?'

'In short,' she said again, 'pretend to give up until he is no longer here to see whether I follow my own inclinations or his? It may be wise advice, Mr. Heathcote; but is it advice which you would like your—anyone you cared for—to take?'

'I should not like anyone I cared for,' he said hesitating—'Pardon me, I cannot help offending you—to be in opposition to her family on such a point.'

The colour rushed to Anne's face, and anger to her heart: but as the one was invisible, so she re-

strained the other. She put restraint in every way on herself.

‘That may be so, that may be so! you cannot tell unless you know everything,’ she said. Then, after a pause, ‘But whether it was right or wrong, it is done now, and I cannot alter it. It is not a matter upon which another can decide for you. Obedience at my age cannot be absolute. When you have to make the one choice of your life, can your father do it, or anyone but yourself? Did you think so when you were like me?’ she said, with an appeal full of earnestness which was almost impassioned. This appeal took Heathcote entirely by surprise, and changed all the current of his thoughts.

‘I was never like you,’ he said, hastily—‘like you! I never could compare myself—I never could pretend—I thought I loved half-a-dozen women. Did I ever make the one choice of my life? No, no! A wandering man afloat upon the world can never be like—such as you: there is too great a difference. We cannot compare things so unlike——’

‘But I thought’—she said, then stopped: for

his story which she had heard bore a very different meaning. And what right had she to advert to it? 'I don't know if you speak in—in respect—or in contempt?'

'In contempt—could that be? Here is the state of the case as concerns yourself—leaving the general question. My offer to break the entail has no attractions for your father, because he thinks he cannot secure Mount to you. It is doing something against his own heart, against all he wishes, to punish you. Don't you know, Miss Mountford—but most likely you never felt it—that

to be wroth with those we love
Doth work like madness in the brain?'

'Love?—that would be great love, passionate love—we have not anything of the kind in our house,' said Anne, in a low tone of emotion. 'If there was that, do you think I would go against it, even for——'

'Here she stopped with a thrill in her voice. 'I think you must be mistaken a little, Mr. Heathcote. But I do not see how I can change. Papa

asked of me—not the lesser things in which I could have obeyed him, but the one great thing in which I could not. Were I to take your advice, I do not know what I could do.’

Then they walked in silence round the side of the house, under the long line of the drawing-room windows, from which indeed the interview had been watched with much astonishment. Rose had never doubted that the heir of the house was on her side. It seemed no better than a desertion that he should walk and talk with Anne in this way. It filled her with amazement. And in such a cold night too! ‘Hush, child!’ her mother was saying; ‘he has been with papa to Hunston, he has heard all the business arrangements talked over. No doubt he is having a little conversation with Anne, for her good.’

‘What are the business arrangements? What is going to happen?’ Is he trying to make her give up Mr. Douglas?’ said Rose; but her mother could not or would not give her any information. By-and-by Heathcote came in alone. Anne was too much disturbed by this strange interview to appear when it

was over in the tranquil circle of the family. She went upstairs to take off her wraps, to subdue the commotion in her mind and the light in her eyes, and tame herself down to the every-day level. Her mind was somewhat confused, more confused than it had yet been as to her duty. Cosmo somehow had seemed to be gently pushed out of the first place by this stranger who never named him, who knew nothing of him, and who certainly ignored the fact that, without Cosmo, Anne no longer lived or breathed. She was angry that he should be so ignorant, yet too shy and proud to mention her lover or refer to him save by implication. She would have been willing to give up corresponding with him, to make any immediate sacrifice to her father's prejudice against him—had that been ever asked of her. But to give up 'the one choice of her life,' as she had said, would have been impossible. Her mind was affected strongly, but not with alarm, by the intelligence that something was being done mysteriously in the dark against her, that the threat under which she had been living was now being carried

out. But this did not move her to submit as Heathcote had urged—rather it stimulated her to resist.

Had Cosmo but been at hand! But if he had been at hand, how could he have ventured to give the advice which Heathcote gave? He could not have asked her to yield, to dissemble, to please the old man while his life lasted, to pretend to give himself up. Nothing of this could he have suggested or she listened to. And yet it was what Cosmo would have liked to advise; but to this state of Cosmo's mind Anne had no clue.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE ABSOLUTE AND THE COMPARATIVE.

THIS secret incident in the family history left a great deal of agitation in the house. Mrs. Mountford had not been informed in any detail what her husband's mission to Hunston was. She knew that he had gone to 'tamper with his will,' as she said, but what were the exact changes he meant to make in that will she did not know. They were certainly to the advantage of Rose and to the detriment of Anne: so much she was aware of, but scarcely anything more. And she herself was frightened and excited, afraid of all the odium to which she would infallibly be exposed if the positions of the sisters were changed, and more or less affected by a shrinking from palpable injustice; but yet very much excited about Rose's possible good fortune, and not feeling

it possible to banish hopes and imaginations on this point out of her mind. If Rose was put in the first place it would not be just—not exactly just, she said to herself, with involuntary softening of the expression. Rose's mother (though she would be blamed) knew that of herself she never would have done anything to deprive Anne of her birthright. But still, if papa thought Anne had behaved badly, and that Rose deserved more at his hands, he was far better—no doubt *far better*, able to judge than she was; and who could say a word against his decision? But it was very irritating, very wearing, not to know. She tried a great many ways of finding out, but she did not succeed. Mr. Mountford was on his guard, and kept his own counsel. He told her of Heathcote's proposal, but he did not tell her what he himself meant to do. And how it was that her husband was so indifferent to Heathcote's proposal Mrs. Mountford could not understand. She herself, though not a Mountford born, felt her heart beat at the suggestion. 'Of course you will jump at it?' she said.

'I do not feel in the least disposed to jump at it.

If there had been a boy, it might have been different. Mrs. Mountford always felt that in this there was an inferred censure upon herself—how unjust a censure it is unnecessary to say: of course she would have had a boy if she could—of that there could be no question.

‘A boy is not everything,’ she said. ‘It would be just the same thing if Anne’s husband took the name.’

‘Don’t speak to me of Anne’s husband,’ he cried, almost with passion. ‘I forbid you to say a word to me of Anne’s affairs.’

‘St. John! what can you mean? It would be barbarous of me, it would be unchristian,’ cried the much-exercised mother, trying hard to do her duty, ‘not to speak of Anne’s affairs. Probably the man you object to will never be her husband; probably——’

‘That is enough, Letitia. I want to hear nothing more upon the subject. Talk of anything else you like, but I will have nothing said about Anne.’

‘Then you are doing wrong,’ she cried, with a

little real indignation. After this her tone changed in a moment : something like bitterness stole into it. ' It shows how much more you are thinking of Anne than of anyone else. You are rejecting Mount because you don't choose that she should be the heir. You forget you have got another child.'

' Forget I have got another child ! It is the first subject of my thoughts.'

' Ah, yes, perhaps so far as the money is concerned. Of course if Anne does not have it, there is nobody but Rose who could have any right to it. But you don't think your youngest daughter good enough to have anything to do with Mount. I see very well how it is, though you don't choose to explain.'

' If that is how you prefer to look at it,' he said ; but at this moment a budget of papers arrived from Hunston by a special messenger, and Mrs. Mountford withdrew perforce. She was in a very irritable condition, as all the house knew, ready to find fault with everything. Perhaps it was rather an advantage to her to have a grievance, and to be able to reproach her husband with preferring in his heart the elder to

the younger, even when he was preferring the younger to the elder in this new will. 'There will never be any question of *my* child's husband taking the name, that is very clear,' she said to herself, with much vehemence, nursing her wrath to keep it warm, and thus escaping from the question of injustice to Anne. And again it occurred to her, but with more force than before, that to announce to her husband that Rose was going to marry Heathcote Mountford would be a delightful triumph. She would thus be Mrs. Mountford of Mount in spite of him, and the victory would be sweet. But even this did not seem to progress as it appeared to do at first. Heathcote, too, seemed to be becoming interested in Anne: as if that could advantage him! when it was clear that Anne was ready to lose everything, and was risking everything, every day, for that other! Altogether Mrs. Mountford's position was not a comfortable one. To know so much and yet to know so little was very hard to bear.

Her husband had a still harder life as being a free agent, and having the whole weight of the

decision upon his shoulders. It was not to be supposed that he could free himself entirely from all sense of guilt towards the child whom in his heart he loved most. He had resolved to punish her, and he clung to his resolution with all the determination of a narrow mind. He had said that she should never marry the man who was nobody, that if she held by him he would give her fortune to Rose. And she did hold by him, with an obstinacy equal to his own. Was it possible that he should bear this and give her reason to laugh at his words as mere sound and fury signifying nothing? No, whatever he might have to suffer for it, no? Perhaps, however, the great secret of Mr. Mountford's obstinate adherence to a determination which he could not but know to be unjust and cruel—and of many more of the cruelties and eccentricities that people perpetrate by their wills—lay in the fact that, after all, though he took so much trouble to make his will, he had not the slightest intention of dying! If a man does not die, a monstrous will is no more than an angry letter—a thing which wounds and

vexes, perhaps, and certainly is intended to wound and vex, and which suffices to blow off a great deal of the steam of family quarrels: but which does no real harm to anybody, in that there is plenty of time to change it, and to make all right again some time or other. Another thing which assisted him in getting over his own doubts and disquietudes was the strenuous, almost violent, opposition of Mr. Loseby, who did not indeed refuse at last to carry out his wishes, but did so with so many protests and remonstrances that Mr. Mountford's spirit was roused, and he forgot the questionings of his own conscience in the determination to defend himself against those of this other man who had, he declared to himself, nothing whatever to do with it, and no right to interfere. Could not a man do what he would with his own? The money was his own, the land his own, and his children too were his own. Who else had anything to do with the arrangements he chose to make for them? It was of his grace and favour if he gave them his money at all. He was not bound to do so. It was all his; he was not responsible to any mortal;

it was a pretty piece of impudence that Loseby should venture to take so much upon him. This opposition of Loseby's did him all the good in the world. It set him right with himself. But still those packets of papers, always accompanied by a letter, were annoying to him. 'I send you the draft of the new codicil, but you must allow me to observe——' 'I return draft with the corrections you have made, but I must once more entreat you to pause and reconsider——' What did the old fellow mean? Did he think he had any right to speak—a country attorney, a mere man of business? To be sure he was an old friend—nobody said he was not an old friend; but the oldest friend in the world should know his own place, and should not presume too far. If Loseby thought that now, when matters had gone this length, *his* representations would have any effect, he was indeed making a mistake. Before pen had been put to paper Mr. Mountford might perhaps have reconsidered the matter; but now, and in apparent deference to *Loseby*! this was a complaisance which was impossible.

The whole house was agitated by these proceedings, though publicly not a word was said nor an allusion made to them. Anne even, absolutely disinterested as she was, and full of a fine, but alas ! quite unreasonable contempt for fortune—the contempt of one who had no understanding of the want of it—felt it affect her in, as she thought, the most extraordinary and unworthy way. She was astonished at herself. After all, she reflected, with a sense of humiliation, how much power must those external circumstances have on the mind, when she, whose principles and sentiments were all so opposed to their influence, could be thus moved by the possible loss of a little land or a little money ! It was pitiful : but she could not help it, and she felt herself humbled to the very dust. In the fulness of her heart she wrote an account of all that was happening to Cosmo, reproaching herself, yet trying to account for her weakness. ‘It cannot be the mere loss of the wealth that affects me,’ Anne wrote. ‘I cannot believe so badly of myself, and I hope—I hope—you will not think so badly of me. It must.

be (don't you think?) the pain of feeling that my father thinks so little of me as to put upon me this public mark of his displeasure. I say to myself, dear Cosmo, that this must be the cause of the very unquestionable pain I feel; and I hope you will think so too, and not that it is the actual money I care for. And, then, there is the humiliation of being put second—I who have always been first. I never thought there was so much in seniority, in all those little superiorities which I suppose we plume ourselves upon without knowing it. I can't bear the idea of being second, I suppose. And then there is the uncertainty, the sense of something that is going on, in which one is so closely concerned, but which one does not know, and the feeling that others are better informed, and that one is being talked of, and the question discussed how one will bear it. As if it mattered! but I acknowledge with humiliation that it does matter, that I care a great deal more than I ever thought I cared—that I am a much poorer creature than I believed I was. I scorn myself, but I hope my Cosmo will not scorn me. You know the

world better, and the heart which is pettier than one likes to think. Perhaps it is women only that are the victims of these unworthy sentiments. I cannot think of you as being moved by them ; perhaps what is said of us is true, and we are only “ like moonlight unto sunlight, and like water unto wine.” But these are far too pretty comparisons if I am right. However, heaven be praised, there is the happiness of feeling that, if I am but after all a mean and interested creature, there is you to fall back upon, who are so different. O Cosmo mio, what would the world be now if I had not you to fall back upon (I like these words !), and lean against and feel myself doubled, or so much more than doubled, and propped up by you. I feel already a little better for getting this off my mind and telling you what I have found out in myself, and how ashamed I am by my discoveries. You have “ larger, other eyes ” than mine, and you will understand me, and excuse me and put me right.’

Cosmo Douglas received this letter in his chambers, to which he had now gone back. He

read it with a sort of consternation. First, the news it conveyed was terrible, making an end of all his hopes; and second, this most ill-timed and unnecessary self-accusation was more than his common sense could put up with. It was not that the glamour of love was wearing off, for he still loved Anne truly; but that anyone in her senses could write so about money was inconceivable to him. Could there be a more serious predicament? and yet here was she apologising to him for feeling it, making believe that he would not feel it. Is she a fool? he said to himself—he was exasperated, though he loved her. And in his reply he could not but in some degree betray this feeling.

‘My dearest,’ he said, ‘I don’t understand how you can blame yourself. The feelings you express are most natural. It is very serious, very painful—ininitely painful to me, that it is my love and the tie which binds us which has brought this upon you. What am I to say to my dear love? Give me up, throw me over? I will bear anything rather than that you should suffer; but I know your generous

heart too well to imagine that you will do this. If you were "petty," as you call yourself (heaven forgive you for such blasphemy!) I could almost be tempted to advise you to have recourse to—what shall I call it?—strategy—one of the fictions that are said to be all fair in love and war. I could do this myself, I am afraid, so little is there in me of the higher sentiment you give me credit for. Rather than that you should lose your birthright, if it were only my happiness that was concerned, I would take myself out of the way, I would give up the sweet intercourse which is life to me, and hope for better days to come. And if you should decide to do this, I will accept whatever you decide, my darling, with full trust in you that you will not forget me, that the sun may shine for me again. Will you do this, my Anne? Obey your father, and let me take my chance: it will be better that than to be the cause of so much suffering to you. But even in saying this I feel that I will wound your tender heart, your fine sense of honour: what can I say? Sacrifice me, my dearest, if you can steel

your heart to the possibility of being unkind. I would be a poor wretch, indeed, unworthy the honour you have done me, if I could not trust you and bide my time.'

This letter was very carefully composed and with much thought. If Anne could but have been made a convert to the code that all is fair in love, what a relief it would have been; or if she could have divined the embarrassment that a portionless bride, however much he loved her, would be to Cosmo! But, on the other hand, there was no certainty that, even if the worst came to the worst, she would be a portionless bride; and the chances of alarming her, and bringing about a revulsion of feeling, were almost more dreadful than the chances of losing her fortune. It wanted very delicate steering to hit exactly the right passage between these dangers, and Cosmo was far from confident that he had hit it. A man with a practical mind and a real knowledge of the world has a great deal to go through when he has to deal with the absolute in the person of a young inexperienced and high-flown girl,

altogether ignorant of the world. And, as a matter of fact, the letter did not please Anne. It gave her that uneasy sense of coming in contact with new agencies, powers unknown, not to be judged by her previous canons, which is one of the first disenchantments of life. How to lie and yet not be guilty of lying was a new science to her. She did not understand that casuistry of love, which makes it a light offence to deceive. She understood the art of taking her own way, but that of giving up her own way, and yet resolving to have it all the same, was beyond her power. What they wanted her to do was to deceive her father, to wait—surely the most terrible of all meanness—till he should be dead and then break her promise to him. This was what Heathcote had advised, and now Cosmo—Cosmo himself replied to her when she threw herself upon him for support, in the same sense. A chill of disappointment, discouragement, came over her. If this was the best thing to be done, it seemed to Anne that her own folly was better than their wisdom. Had she been told that love and a stout heart and two against

the world were better than lands or wealth, she would have felt herself strong enough for any heroism. But this dash of cold water in her face confounded her. What did they mean by telling her to obey her father? he had not asked for obedience. He had said, 'If you do not give up this man, I will take your fortune from you,' and she had proudly accepted the alternative. That was all; and was she to go back to him now, to tell him a lie, and with a mental reservation say, 'I preter my fortune; I have changed my mind; I will give him up?' Anne knew that she could not have survived the utter scorn of herself which would have been her portion had she done this. Were it necessary to do it, the proud girl would have waited till the other sacrifice was completed, till her father had fulfilled his threat. Cosmo's letter gave her a chill in the very warmth of her unbounded faith in him. She would not allow to herself that he did not understand her, that he had failed of what she expected from him. This was honour, no doubt, from his point of view; but she felt a chill sense of lone-

liness, a loss of that power of falling back upon an unfailing support which she had so fondly and proudly insisted on. She was subdued in her courage and pride and confidence. And yet this was not all that Anne had to go through.

It was Mr. Loseby who was the next operator upon her disturbed and awakening thoughts. One wintry afternoon when November had begun, he drove over to Mount in his little phaeton with a blue bag on the seat beside him. ‘Don’t say anything to your master yet, Saymore,’ he said, when he got down, being familiar with all the servants, and the habits of the house, as if it had been his own. ‘Do you think you could manage to get me a few words privately with Miss Anne?’

‘If I might make bold to ask, sir,’ said Saymore, ‘is it true as there is something up about Miss Anne? Things is said and things is ’inted, and we’re interested, and we don’t know what to think. Is it along of *that* gentleman, Mr. Loseby? Master is set against the match, I know as much as that.’

‘I dare say you’re right,’ said the lawyer. ‘An

old family servant like you, Saymore, sees many things that the rest of the world never guess at. Hold your tongue about it, old fellow, that's all I've got to say. And try whether you can bring me to speech of Miss Anne. Don't let anyone else know. You can manage it, I feel sure.'

'I'll try, sir,' Saymore said, and he went through the house on tiptoe from room to room, looking for his young mistress, with the air of a conspirator in an opera, doing everything he could to betray himself. When he found her, he stole behind a large screen, and made mysterious gestures which everybody saw. 'What is it, Saymore?' asked Anne. Then Saymore pointed downstairs, with jerks over his shoulder, and much movement of his eyebrows. 'There's somebody, Miss Anne, as wants a word with you,' he said, with the deepest meaning. Anne's heart began to beat. Could it be Cosmo come boldly, in person, to comfort her? She was in the billiard-room with Rose and Heathcote. She put down the cue which she had been using with very little energy or interest, and followed the old man to

the hall. 'Who is it, Saymore?' she asked tremulously. 'It's some one that's come for your good. I hope you'll listen to him, Miss Anne, I hope you'll listen to him.' Anne's heart was in her mouth. If he should have come so far to see her, to support her, to make up for the deficiency of his letter! She seemed to tread on air as she went down the long passages. And it was only Mr. Loseby after all!

The disappointment made her heart sink. She could scarcely speak to him. It was like falling down to earth from the skies. But Mr. Loseby did not notice this. He put his arm into hers as the rector did, with a fatherly familiarity, and drew her to the large window full of the greyness of the pale and misty November sky. 'I have something to say to you, my dear Miss Anne—something that is of consequence. My dear, do you know anything about the business that brings me here?'

'I know—that my father is making some alteration in his will, Mr. Loseby. I don't know any more—why should I?—I do not see why I should believe that it has anything to do with me.'

‘Anne, my dear, I can’t betray your father’s secrets; but I am afraid it has something to do with you. Now look here, my dear girl—why it is not so long since you used to sit on my knee! Tell me what this is, which has made you quarrel with papa——’

‘Mr. Loseby!—I—do not know that I have quarrelled with my father——’

‘Don’t be so stern, my dear child. Call him papa. After all he is your papa, Anne. Who was so fond of you when you were a tiny creature? I remember you a baby in his arms, poor man! when he lost his first wife, before he married again. Your mother died so young, and broke his life in two. That is terribly hard upon a man. Think of him in that light, my dear. He was wrapped up in you when you were a baby. Come! let me go to him, an old friend, your very oldest friend, and say you are ready to make it up.’

‘To make it up?—but it is not a quarrel—not anything like a quarrel.’

‘Yes, yes, it is—I know better. Only say that

you will do nothing without his consent ; that you will form no engagement ; that you will give up corresponding and all that. You ought to, my dear ; it is your duty. And when it will save you from what would inconvenience you all your life ! What, Anne, you are not going to be offended with what I say, your oldest friend ? ’

‘ Mr. Loseby, you do not understand,’ she said. She had attempted, in her impatience, to withdraw her arm from his. ‘ He said “ Give up ”—I do not wish to conceal who it is—“ give up Mr. Douglas, or I will take away your portion and give it to your sister.” What could I say ? Could I show so little faith in the choice I had made—so little—so little—regard for the gentleman I am going to marry, as to say, “ I prefer my fortune ? ” I will not do it ; it would be falsehood and baseness. This is all the alternative I have ever had. It is like saying, “ Your money or your life ”——’

‘ In that case one gives the money, Anne, to save the life.’

‘ And so I have done,’ she said, proudly. ‘ Dear

Mr. Loseby, I don't want to vex you. I don't want to quarrel with anyone. Can I say, when it is not true—"I have changed my mind, I like the money best?" Don't you see that I could not do that? then what can I do?'

'You can give in, my dear, you can give in,' repeated the lawyer. 'No use for entering into particulars. So long as you authorise me to say you give in—that is all, I am sure, that is needful. Don't turn me off, Anne—give me the pleasure of reconciling you, my dear.'

Mr. Loseby had always given himself out as one of Anne's adorers. His eyes glistened with the moisture in them. He pressed her arm within his. 'Come, my dear! I never was a father myself, which I have always regretted; but I have known you all your life. Let me do you a good turn—let me put a stop to all this nonsense, and tell him you will make it up.'

Anne's heart had sunk very low; with one assault of this kind after another she was altogether discouraged. She did not seem to care what she said,

or what interpretation was put upon her words. 'You may say what you please,' she said. 'I will make it up, if you please: but what does that mean, Mr. Loseby? I will give up writing, if he wishes it—but how can I give up the—gentleman I am engaged to? Do you think I want to quarrel? Oh, no, no—but what can I do? Give up!—I have no right. He has my promise and I have his. Can I sell that for money?' cried Anne, indignantly. 'I will do whatever papa pleases—except that.'

'You are making him do a dreadful injustice, Anne. Come, what does this young fellow say? Does he not want to release you, to save you from suffering? does he hold you to your promise in the face of such a loss? An honourable young man would tell you: never mind me——'

Anne detached her arm with a little energy from his. 'Why should you torment me?' she cried. 'An honourable man?—is it honour, then, to prefer, as you said yourself, one's money to one's life?'

'My dear child, money is always there, it is always to be relied upon; it is a strong back, what-

ever happens—whereas this, that you call life——!’ cried Mr. Loseby, spreading out his hands and lifting up his eyebrows; he had chosen the very image she had herself used when writing to her lover. Was this then what they all thought, that wealth was the best thing to fall back upon? She smiled, but it was a smile of pain.

‘If I thought so, I should not care either for the life or the money,’ she said.

Mr. Loseby held up his hands once more. He shook his shining little bald head, and took up his blue bag from the table. ‘You are as obstinate, as pig-headed, the whole family of you—one worse than another,’ he said.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AFTERTHOUGHTS.

THERE were two witnesses wanted for the will ; one of these was Heathcote Mountford, the other the clerk whom Mr. Loseby had brought with him in his phaeton. He stood by himself, looking as like an indignant prophet whose message from heaven has been disregarded, as a fat little shining man of five feet four could look. It had been to make a last attempt upon the mind of Mr. Mountford, and also to try what effect he could produce on the heart of Anne, that he had come himself, facing all the risks of an east wind, with perhaps snow to come. And there had been a long and stormy interview in the library before the clerk had been called in. ‘She will give up the correspondence. She is as sweet as a girl can be,’ said the old lawyer, fibbing manfully ;

‘one can see that it goes to her heart that you should think her disobedient. Mountford, you don’t half know what a girl that is. But for the money she would come to you, she would put herself at your feet, she would give up everything. But she says, bless her! “Papa would think it was because of the money. Do you think I would do that for the money which I wouldn’t do to please him?” That’s Anne all over,’ said her mendacious advocate. ‘After you have accomplished this injustice and cut her off, that sweet creature will come to you some fine day and say, “Papa, I give him up. I give everything up that displeases you—I cannot go against my duty.”’

There was a slight attempt at imitation of Anne’s voice in Mr. Loseby’s tone; he tried a higher key when he made those imaginary speeches on her behalf: but his eyes were glistening all the time: he did not intend to be humorous. And neither was Mr. Mountford a man who saw a joke. He took it grimly without any softening.

‘When she does that, Loseby, if I see reason

to believe that she means it, I'll make another will.'

'You speak at your ease of making another will—are you sure you will have it in your power? When a man makes an unjust will, I verily believe every word is a nail in his coffin. It is very seldom,' said Mr. Loseby, with emphasis, carried away by his feelings, 'that they live to repent.'

Mr. Mountford paled in spite of himself. He looked up sharply at his mentor, then laughed a short uneasy laugh. 'There's nothing like a partisan,' he said; 'I call that brutal—if it were not so silly, Loseby—unworthy a man of your sense.'

'By ——!' the lawyer cried to relieve himself, 'I don't see the silliness; when you've taken a wrong step that may plunge other people into misery, I cannot see how you can have any confidence, even in the protection of God; and you are not in your first youth any more than myself. The thought of dying can't be put aside at your age or at my age, Mountford, as if we were boys of twenty. We have got to think of it, whether we will or not.'

This address made Mr. Mountford furious. He felt no occasion at all in himself to think of it ; it was a brutal argument, and quite beyond all legitimate discussion ; but nevertheless it was not pleasant. He did not like the suggestion. ‘Perhaps you’ll call that clerk of yours, and let us finish the business, before we get into fancy and poetry. I never knew you were so imaginative,’ he said, with a sneer ; but his lips were bluish, notwithstanding this attempt at disdain. And Mr. Loseby stood with his spectacles pushed up on his forehead, as if with a desire not to see, holding his little bald head high in the air, with a fine indignation in every line of his figure. Heathcote, who was brought in to sign as one of the witnesses, felt that it needed all his consciousness of the importance of what was going on to save him from indecorous laughter. When Mr. Mountford said, ‘I deliver this,’ ‘And I protest against it,’ Mr. Loseby cried, in a vehement undertone, ‘protest against it before earth and heaven.’ ‘Do you mean little Thompson there and Heathcote Mountford?’ said the testator, looking up with a laugh that was more like

a snarl. And Heathcote too perceived that his very lips were palish, bluish, and the hand not so steady as usual with which he pushed the papers away. But Mr. Mountford recovered himself with great courage. 'Now that I have finished my business, we will have time to consider your proposition,' he said, putting his hand on Heathcote's shoulder as he got up from his chair. 'That is, if you have time to think of anything serious in the midst of all this ball nonsense. You must come over for the ball, Loseby, a gay young bachelor like you.'

'You forget I am a widower, Mr. Mountford,' said the lawyer, with great gravity.

'To be sure; I beg your pardon; but you are always here when there is anything going on; and while the young fools are dancing, we'll consider this question of the entail.'

'I don't know what he means,' Mr. Loseby said, some time after taking Heathcote into a corner; 'consider the question of the entail the moment he has made another will! I'll tell you what it is—he is repenting already. I thought what I said couldn't

be altogether without effect. St. John Mountford is as obstinate as a pig, but he is not a fool. I thought he must be touched by what I said. That's how it is; he would not seem to give in to us; but if you agree on this point, it will be a fine excuse for beginning it all over again. That's a new light—and it's exactly like him—it's St. John Mountford all over,' said the lawyer, rubbing his hands; 'as full of crotchets as an egg is full of meat—but yet not such a bad fellow after all.'

The household, however, had no such consoling consciousness of the possibility there was of having all done over again, and there was a great deal of agitation on the subject, both upstairs and down. Very silent upstairs—where Mrs. Mountford, in mingled compunction on Anne's account and half-guilty joy (though it was none of her doing she said to herself) in respect to Rose's (supposedly) increased fortune, was reduced to almost complete dumbness, her multiplicity of thoughts making it impossible to her to share in Rose's chatter about the coming ball; and where Anne, satisfied to think that

whatever was to happen had happened, and could no longer be supposed to depend upon any action of hers, sat proud and upright by the writing-table, reading—and altogether out of the talk which Rose carried on, and was quite able to carry on whatever happened, almost entirely by herself. Rose had the same general knowledge that something very important was going on as the rest; but to her tranquil mind, a bird in the hand was always more interesting than two or three in the bush. Downstairs, however, Saymore and Worth and the cook were far from silent. They had a notion of the state of affairs which was wonderfully accurate, and a strong conviction that Miss Anne for her sins had been deposed from her eminence and Miss Rose put in her place. The feeling of Saymore and the cook was strong in Anne's favour, but Mrs. Worth was not so certain. 'Miss Rose is a young lady that is far more patient to have her things tried on,' Worth said. Saymore brought down an account of the party in the drawing-room, which was very interesting to the select party in the housekeeper's room. 'Missis by

the side of the fire, as serious as a judge—puckering up her brows—never speaking a word.’

‘I dare say she was counting,’ said Worth.

‘And Miss Anne up by the writing-table, with her back against the wall, reading a book, never taking no notice no more than if she were seventy; and Miss Rose a-chattering. The two before the fire had it all their own way. They were writing down and counting up all the folks for this dance. Dash the dance!’ said Saymore; ‘that sort of a nonsense is no satisfaction to reasonable folks. But Miss Rose, she’s as merry as a cricket with her Cousin Heathcote and Cousin Heathcote at every word. She knows it’s all to her advantage what’s been a-doing to-day.’

‘That might be a match, I shouldn’t wonder—eh!’ said the cook, who was from the north-country; ‘the luck as some folks have—I never can understand these queer wills; why can’t gentlefolks do like poor folks, and divide fair, share and share alike? As for what you call entail, I don’t make head or tail of it; but if Miss Rose’s to get all the

brass, and marry the man with the land, and Miss Anne to get nought, it's easy to see that isn't fair.'

'If it's the cousin you mean,' said Mrs. Worth, 'he is just twice too old for Miss Rose.'

'Then he will know how to take care of her,' said Saymore, which made the room ring with laughter: for though the affairs of the drawing-room were interesting, there was naturally a still warmer attraction in the drama going on downstairs.

Mr. Mountford was in his room alone. He had retired there after dinner, as was his custom. At dinner he had been very serious. He had not been able to get Mr. Loseby's words out of his mind. Every word a nail in his coffin! What superstitious folly it was! No man ever died the sooner for attending to his affairs, for putting them in order, he said to himself. But this was not simply putting them in order. His mind was greatly disturbed. He had thought that, as soon as he had done it he would be relieved and at ease from the pressure of the irritation which had disturbed him so; but now that it was done he was more disturbed than ever.

Perhaps for the first time he fully realised that, if anything should happen to himself, one of his children would be made to sustain the cruellest disappointment and wrong. 'It will serve her right,' he tried to say to himself, 'for the way she has behaved to me;' but when it became really apparent to him that this would be, not merely a tremendous rebuff and discomfiture for Anne, but a settled fate which she could not escape, a slight shiver ran through him. He had not seen this so plainly before. He had meant to punish her, cruelly, even bitterly, and with an ironical completeness. But then he had never meant to die. This made a greater difference than it was possible to say. He meant that she should know that her marriage was impossible; that he had the very poorest opinion of the man she had chosen; that he would not trust him, and was determined never to let him handle a penny of his (Mr. Mountford's) money. In short, he said to himself, what he meant was to save Anne from this adventurer, who would no longer wish to marry her when he knew her to be penniless. He

meant, he persuaded himself, that his will should have this effect in his lifetime ; he meant it to be known, and set things right, not in the future, but at once. Now that all was done he saw the real meaning of the tremendous instrument he had made for the first time. To save Anne from an adventurer—not to die and leave her without provision, not really to give anything away from her, though she deserved it after the way in which she had defied him, had been his intention. Mr. Mountford thought this over painfully, not able to think of anything else. Last night even, no later, he had been thinking it over vindictively, pleased with the cleverness and completeness with which he had turned the tables upon his daughter. It had pleased him immoderately before it was done. But now that it was done, and old Loseby, like an old fool, had thrown in that bit of silly superstition about the nails in his coffin, it did not please him any longer. His face had grown an inch or two longer, nothing like a smile would come whatever he might do. When his wife came ‘to sit with him,’ as she often did, perturbed herself, half frightened, half exultant, and

eager to learn all she could, he sent her away impatiently. 'I have a great deal to do,' he said. 'What do I care for your ball? For heaven's sake let me have a little quiet. I have a great mind to say that there shall be no ball——' 'Papa!' his wife said, 'you would not be so unkind. Rose has set her heart on it so.' 'Oh confound——!' he said. Did he mean confound Rose, whom he had just chosen to be his heir, whom he had promoted to the vacant place of Anne? All through this strange business Mrs. Mountford's secret exultation, when she dared to permit herself to indulge it, in the good fortune of her daughter had been chequered by a growing bitterness in the thought that, though Rose was to have the inheritance, Anne still retained by far the higher place even in her husband's thoughts. He was resolved apparently that nobody should have any satisfaction in this overturn—not even the one person who was benefited. Mrs. Mountford went away with a very gloomy countenance after the confound——! The only thing that gave her any consolation was to see the brisk conversation going on

between her daughter and Heathcote Mountford. Anne sat stiff and upright, quite apart from them, reading, but the two who were in front of the cheerful fire in the full light of the lamp were chattering with the gayest ease. Even Mrs. Mountford wondered at Rose, who surely knew enough to be a little anxious, a little perturbed as her mother was—but who showed no more emotion than the cricket that chirped on the hearth. Was it mere innocence and childish ease of heart, or was it that there was no heart at all? Even her mother could not understand her. And Heathcote, too, who knew a great deal, if not all that was going on, though he threw back lightly the ball of conversation, wondered at the gaiety of this little light-minded girl who was not affected, not a hair's breadth, by the general agitation of the house, nor by the disturbed countenance of her mother, nor by her sister's seriousness. He talked—it was against his principles not to respond to the gay challenges thrown out to him—but he wondered. Did she know nothing, though everybody else knew? Was she incapable of divining that other

people were in trouble? The conversation was very lively in front of the fire, but he, too, as well as the others, wondered at Rose.

And Mr. Mountford alone in his library thought, and over again thought. Supposing after all, incredible as it seemed, that *he was to die*? He did not entertain the idea, but it took possession of him against his will. He got up and walked about the room in the excitement it caused. He felt his pulse almost involuntarily, and was a little comforted to feel that it was beating just as usual; but if it should happen as Loseby said? He would not acknowledge to himself that he had done a wrong thing, and yet, if anything of that sort were to take place, he could not deny that the punishment he had inflicted was too severe. Whereas, as he intended it, it was not a punishment, but a precaution; it was to prevent Anne throwing herself away upon an adventurer, a nobody. Better even that she should have no money than be married for her money, than fall into the hands of a man unworthy of her. But then, supposing he were to die, and this will, made—

certainly, as he persuaded himself, as a mere precautionary measure—should become final? That would make a very great difference. For a long time Mr. Mountford thought over the question. He was caught in his own net. After all that had been said and done, he could not change the will that he had made. It was not within the bounds of possibility that he should send for that little busybody again and acknowledge to him that he had made a mistake. What was there that he could do? He sat up long beyond his usual hour. Saymore, extremely curious and excited by so strange an incident, came to his door three several times to see that the fire was out and to extinguish the lamp, and received the last time such a reception as sent the old man hurrying along the passages at a pace nobody had ever seen him adopt before, as if in danger of his life. Then Mrs. Mountford came, very anxious, on tiptoe in her dressing-gown, to see if anything was the matter; but she too retired more quickly than she came. He let his fire go out, and his lamp burn down to the last drop of oil—and it was only

when he had no more light to go on with, and was chilled to death, that he lighted his candle and made his way to his own room through the silent house.

The victim herself was somewhat sad. She had spent the evening in a proud and silent indignation, saying nothing, feeling the first jar of fate, and the strange pang of the discovery that life was not what she had thought, but far less moved by what her father had done than by the failure round of her understanding and support. And when she had gone to her room, she had cried as did not misbecome her sex and her age, but then had read Cosmo's letter over again, and had discovered a new interpretation for it, and reading between the lines, had found it all generosity and nobleness, and forthwith reconciled herself to life and fate. But her father had no such ready way of escape. He was the master of Anne's future in one important respect, the arbiter of the family existence, with the power of setting up one and putting down another ; but he had no reserve of imaginative strength, no fund of generous and high-

flown sentiment, no love-letter to restore his courage. He did what he could to bring that courage back. During the hours which he spent unapproachable in his library, he had been writing busily, producing pages of manuscript, half of which he had destroyed as soon as it was written. At the end, however, he so far satisfied himself as to concoct something of which he made a careful copy. The original he put into one envelope, the duplicate into another, and placed these two packets in the drawer of his writing-table, just as his light failed him. As he went upstairs his cold feet and muddled head caused him infinite alarm, and he blamed himself in his heart for risking his health. What he had done in his terror that night might have been left till to-morrow ; whereas he might have caught cold, and cold might lead to bronchitis. Every word a nail in his coffin ! What warrant had Loseby for such a statement ? Was there any proof to be given of it ? Mr. Mountford's head was buzzing and confused with the unusual work and the still more unusual anxiety. Perhaps he had caught an illness ; he did not feel able to

think clearly or even to understand his own apprehensions. He felt his pulse again before he went to bed. It was not feverish—yet : but who could tell what it might be in the morning? And his feet were so cold that he could not get any warmth in them, even though he held them close to the dying fire.

He was not, however, feverish in the morning, and his mind became more placid as the day went on. The two packets were safe in the drawer of the writing-table. He took them out and looked at them as a man might look at a bottle of quack medicine, clandestinely secured and kept in reserve against an emergency. He would not care to have his possession of it known, and yet there it was, should the occasion to try it occur. He felt a little happier to know that he could put his hands upon it should it be wanted—or at least a little less alarmed and nervous. And days passed on without any symptoms of cold or other illness. There was no sign or sound of these nails driven into his coffin. And the atmosphere grew more clear in the house. Anne, between whom

and himself there had been an inevitable reserve and coldness, suddenly came out of that cloud, and presented herself to him the Anne of old, with all the sweetness and openness of nature. The wrong had now been accomplished, and was over, and there was a kind of generous amusement to Anne in the consternation which her sudden return to all her old habits occasioned among the people surrounding her, who knew nothing of her inner life of imaginative impulse and feeling. She took her cottage-plans into the library one morning with her old smile as if nothing had happened or could happen. The plans had been all pushed aside in the silent combat between her father and herself. Mr. Mountford could not restrain a little outburst of feeling, which had almost the air of passion. ‘Why do you bring them to me? Don’t you know you are out of it, Anne? Don’t you know I have done—what I told you I should do?’

‘I heard that you had altered your will, papa; but that does not affect the cottagers. They are always there whoever has the estate?’

‘Don’t you mind, then, who has the estate?’

‘Yes, immensely,’ said Anne, with a smile. ‘I could not have thought I should mind half so much. I have felt the coming down and being second. But I am better again. You have a right to do what you please, and I shall not complain.’

He sat in his chair at his writing-table (in the drawer of which were still those two sealed packets) and looked at her with contemplative, yet somewhat abashed eyes. There was an unspeakable relief in being thus entirely reconciled to her, notwithstanding the sense of discomfiture and defeat it gave him. ‘Do you think—your sister—will be able to manage property?’ he said.

‘No doubt she will marry, papa.’

‘Ah!’ he had not thought of this somehow. ‘She will marry, and my substance will go into the hands of some stranger, some fellow I never heard of; that is a pleasant prospect: he will be a fool most likely, whether he is an adventurer or not.’

‘We must all take our chance, I suppose,’ said Anne, with a little tremor in her voice. She knew

the adventurer was levelled at herself. 'I suppose you have made it a condition that he shall take the name of Mountford, papa?'

He made her no reply, but looked up suddenly with a slight start. Oddly enough he had made no stipulation in respect to Rose. It had never occurred to him that it was of the slightest importance what name Rose's husband should bear. He gave Anne a sudden startled look; then, for he would not commit himself, changed the subject abruptly. After this interval of estrangement it was so great a pleasure to talk to Anne about the family affairs. 'What do you think,' he said, 'about Heathcote's proposal, Anne?'

'I should have liked to jump at it, papa. Mount in our own family! it seemed too good to be true.'

'Seemed! you speak as if it were in the past. I have not said no yet. I have still got the offer in my power. Mount in our own family! but we have not got a family—a couple of girls!'

'If we had not been a couple of girls there would have been no trouble about the entail,' said

Anne, permitting herself a laugh. ‘And of course Rose’s husband——’

‘I know nothing about Rose’s husband,’ he cried testily. ‘I never thought of him. And so you can talk of all this quite at your ease?’ he added. ‘You don’t mind?’

This was a kind of offence to him, as well as a satisfaction. She had no right to think so little of it; and yet what a relief it was!

Anne shook her head and smiled. ‘It is better not to talk of it at all,’ she said.

This conversation had a great effect upon Mr. Mountford. Though perhaps it proved him more wrong than ever, it restored him to all the ease of family intercourse which had been impeded of late. And it set the whole house right. Anne, who had been in the shade, behind backs, resigning many of her usual activities on various pretences, came back naturally to her old place. It was like a transformation scene. And everybody was puzzled, from Mrs. Mountford, who could not understand it at all, and Heathcote, who divined that some compromise

had been effected, to the servants, whose interest in Miss Anne rose into new warmth, and who concluded that she had found means at last 'to come over master,' which was just what they expected from her. After this everything went on very smoothly, as if the wheels of life had been freshly oiled, and velvet spread over all its roughnesses. Even the preparations for the ball proceeded with far more spirit than before. The old wainscoted banqueting-room, which had not been used for a long time, though it was the pride of the house, was cleared for dancing, and Anne had already begun to superintend the decoration of it. Everything went on more briskly from the moment that she took it in hand, for none of the languid workers had felt that there was any seriousness in the preparations till Anne assumed the direction of them. Heathcote, who was making acquaintance very gradually with the differing characters of the household, understood this sudden activity less than anything before. 'Is it for love of dancing?' he said. Anne laughed and shook her head.

‘I don’t know that I shall enjoy this ball much ; but I am not above dancing—and I enjoy *this*,’ she said. ‘I like to be doing something.’ To have regained her own sense of self-command, her superiority to circumstances, made this magnanimous young woman happy in her downfall. She liked the knowledge that she was magnanimous almost more than the good fortune and prosperity which she had lost. She had got over her misfortunes. She gave her head a little toss aloft, shaking off all shadows, as she ran hither and thither, the soul of everything. She had got the upper hand of fate.

As for Mr. Mountford, he had a great deal more patience about the details of the approaching entertainment when Anne took them in hand. Either she managed to make them amusing to him, or the additional reality in the whole matter, from the moments he put herself at the head of affairs, had a corresponding effect upon her father. Perhaps, indeed, a little feeling of making up to her, by a more than ordinary readiness to accept all her lesser desires, was in his mind. His moroseness melted

away. He forgot his alarm about his health and Mr. Loseby's ugly words. It is possible, indeed, that he might have succeeded in forgetting altogether what he had done, or at least regaining his feeling that it was a mere expedient to overawe Anne and bring her into order, liable to be changed as everything changes—even wills, when there are long years before the testator—but for the two sealed envelopes in his drawer which he could not help seeing every time he opened it. A day or two before the ball some business called him into Hunston, and he took them out with a half smile, weighing them in his hand. Should he carry them with him and put them in Loseby's charge? or should he leave them there? He half laughed at the ridiculous expedient to which Loseby's words had driven him, and looked at the two letters jocularly; but in the end he determined to take them. It would be as well to put them in old Loseby's hands. Heathcote volunteered to ride with him as he had done before. It was again a bright calm day, changed only in so far as November is different from October. There had been stormy

weather in the meantime, and the trees were almost bare; but still it was fine and bright. Anne came out from the hall and stood on the steps to see them ride off. She gave them several commissions: to inquire at the bookseller's for the ball programmes, and to carry to the haberdasher's a note of something Mrs. Worth wanted. She kissed her hand to her father as he rode away, and his penitent heart gave him a prick. 'You would not think that was a girl that had just been cut off with a shilling,' he said, half mournfully (as if it had been a painful necessity), and half with parental braggadocio, proud of her pluck and spirit.

'I thought you must have changed your mind,' Heathcote said.

Mr. Mountford shook his head and said, 'No, worse luck. I have not changed my mind.'

This was the only expression of changed sentiment to which he gave vent. When they called at Mr. Loseby's, the lawyer received them with a mixture of satisfaction and alarm. 'What's up now?' he said, coming out of the door of his private room

to receive them. 'I thought I should see you presently.' But when he was offered the two sealed letters Mr. Loseby drew back his hand as if he had been stung. 'You have been making another will,' he said, 'all by yourself, to ruin your family and make work for us lawyers after you are dead and gone.'

'No,' said Mr. Mountford, eagerly, 'no, no—it is only some stipulations.'

The packets were each inscribed with a legend on the outside, and the lawyer was afraid of them. He took them gingerly with the ends of his fingers, and let them drop into one of the boxes which lined his walls. As for Mr. Mountford, he became more jaunty and pleased with himself every moment. He went to the haberdasher's for Mrs. Worth, and to the stationer's to get the programmes which had been ordered for the ball. He was more cheerful than his companion had ever seen him. He opened the subject of the entail of his own accord as they went along. 'Loseby is coming for the ball: it is a kind of thing he likes; and then we shall talk it

over,' he said. Perhaps in doing this a way might be found of setting things straight, independent of these sealed packets, which, however, in the meantime, were a kind of sop to fate, a propitiation to Nemesis. Then they rode home in cheerful talk. By the time night fell they had got into the park; and though the trees stood up bare against the dark blue sky, and the grass looked too wet and spongy for pleasant riding, there was still some beauty in the dusky landscape. Mount, framed in its trees and showing in the distance the cheerful glow of its lights, had come in sight. 'It is a pleasant thing to come home, and to know that one is looked for and always welcome,' Mr. Mountford said. Heathcote had turned round to answer, with some words on his lips about his own less happy lot, when suddenly the figure at his side dropped out of the dusk around them. There was a muffled noise, a floundering of horse's hoofs, a dark heap upon the grass, moving, struggling, yet only half discernible in the gloom, over which he almost stumbled and came to the ground also, so sudden was the fall. His own horse

swerved violently, just escaping its companion's hoof. And through the darkness there ran a sharp broken cry, and then a groan : which of them came from his own lips Heathcote did not know.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE CATASTROPHE.

ALL was pleasant commotion and stir in Mount, where almost every room had received some addition to its decoration. On this particular evening there was a great show of candles in the old banqueting hall, which was to be the ballroom, and great experiments in lighting were going on. The ball at Mount was stirring the whole county. In all the houses about there was more or less commotion, toilets preparing, an additional thrill of liveliness and pleasure sent into the quiet country life. And Mount itself was all astir. Standing outside, it was pretty to watch the lights walking about the full house, gliding along the long corridors, gleaming at windows along the whole breadth of the rambling old place. With all these lights streaming out into the night, the house seemed to warm

the evening air, which was now white with inevitable mists over the park. Rose ran about like a child, delighted with the stir, dragging holly wreaths after her, and holding candles to all the workers; but Anne had the real work in hand. It was to her the carpenters came for their orders, and the servants who never knew from one half-hour to another what next was to be done. Mrs. Mountford had taken the supper under her charge, and sat serenely over her worsted work, in the consciousness that whatever might go wrong, that, at least, would be right. 'As for your decorations, I wash my hands of them,' she said. It was Anne upon whom all these cares fell. And though she was by no means sure that she would enjoy the ball, it was quite certain, as she had said to Heathcote, that she enjoyed *this*. She enjoyed the sensation of being herself again, and able to throw herself into this occupation with a fine indifference to her own personal standing in the house. If she had been dethroned in the will, only herself could dethrone her in nature. She felt, as she wished to feel, that

she was above all that ; that she was not even under the temptation of sullenness, and had no sense of injury to turn the sweet into bitter. She went about holding her head consciously a little higher than usual, as with a gay defiance of all things that could pull her down. Who could pull her down, save herself? And what was the use of personal happiness, of that inspiration and exhilaration of love which was in her veins, if it did not make her superior to all little external misfortunes? She felt magnanimous, and to feel so seemed to compensate her for everything else. It would have been strange, indeed, she said to herself, if the mere loss of a fortune had sufficed to crush the spirit of a happy woman, a woman beloved, with a great life before her. She smiled at fate in her faith and happiness. Her head borne higher than usual, thrown back a little, her eyes shining, a smile, in which some fine contempt for outside trouble just touched the natural sweetness of her youth, to which, after all, it was so natural to take pleasure in all that she was about—all these signs and marks of unusual commotion in her mind,

of the excitement of a crisis about her, struck the spectators, especially the keen-sighted ones below stairs. 'It can't be like we think. She's the conquering hero, Miss Anne is. She's just like that army with banners as is in the Bible,' said the north-country cook. 'I don't understand her not a bit,' Saymore said, who knew better, who was persuaded that Anne had not conquered. Mrs. Worth opined that it was nature and nothing more. 'A ball is a ball, however downhearted you may be ; it cheers you up, whatever is a going to happen,' she said ; but neither did this theory find favour in old Saymore's eyes.

What a beehive it was ! Rooms preparing for the visitors who were to come to-morrow, linen put out to air, fires lighted, housemaids busy ; in the kitchen all the cook's underlings, with aids from the village, already busy over the ball supper. Even Mrs. Mountford had laid aside her worsted work, and was making bows of ribbons for the cotillon. There was to be a cotillon. It was 'such fun,' Rose had said. In the ballroom the men were busy hammering, fixing up wreaths, and hanging curtains. Both

the girls were there superintending, Rose half encircled by greenery. There was so much going on, so much noise that it was difficult to hear anything. And it must have been a lull in the hammering, in the consultation of the men, in the moving of step-ladders and sound of heavy boots over the floor, which allowed that faint sound to penetrate to Anne's ear. What was it? 'What was that?' she cried. They listened a moment, humouring her. What should it be? The hammers were sounding gaily, John Stokes, the carpenter belonging to the house, mounted high upon his ladder, with tacks in his mouth, his assistant holding up to him one of the muslin draperies. The wreaths were spread out over the floor. Now and then a maid put in her head to gaze, and admire, and wonder. 'Oh, you are always fancying something, Anne,' said Rose. 'You forget how little time we have.' Then suddenly it came again, and everybody heard. A long cry, out of the night, a prolonged halloo. John Stokes himself put down his hammer. 'It's somebody got into the pond,' he said. 'No, it's the other side of

the park,' said the other man. Anne ran out to the corridor, and threw open the window at the end, which swept a cold gust through all the house. A wind seemed to have got up at that moment, though it had been calm before. Then it came again, a long, far-echoing 'halloo—halloo—help!' Was it 'help' the voice cried? No doubt it was an appeal, whatever it was.

The men threw down their hammers and rushed downstairs with a common instinct, to see what it was. Anne stood leaning out of the window straining her eyes in the milky misty air, which seemed to grow whiter and less clear as she gazed. 'Oh, please put down the window,' cried Rose, shivering, 'it is so cold—and what good can we do? It is poachers, most likely; it can't be anybody in the pond, or they wouldn't go on shrieking like that.' Saymore, who had come up to look at the decorations, gave the same advice. 'You'll get your death of cold, Miss Anne, and you can't do no good; maybe it's something caught in a snare—they cry like Christians, them creatures do, though we call 'em

dumb creatures; or it's maybe a cart gone over on the low road—the roads is very heavy; or one of the keepers as has found something; it's about time for Master and Mr. Heathcote coming back from Hunston; they'll bring us news. Don't you be nervish, Miss Anne; they'll see what it is. I've known an old owl make just such a screeching.'

'Could an owl say "halloo,"' said Anne, 'and "help"? I am sure I heard "help." I hear somebody galloping up to the door—no, it is not to the door, it is to the stables. It will be papa or Heathcote come for help. I am sure it is something serious,' she said. And she left the great window wide open, and rushed downstairs. As for Rose she was very chilly. She withdrew within the warmer shelter of the ballroom, and arranged the bow of ribbon with which one of the hangings was to be finished. 'Put down the window,' she said; 'it can't do anyone any good to let the wind pour in like that, and chill all the house.'

Heathcote had been half an hour alone in the great wilderness of the park, nothing near him that

could help, the trees rustling in the wind, standing far off round about like a scared circle of spectators, holding up piteous hands to heaven, but giving no aid. He was kneeling upon the horse's head, himself no more than a protuberance in the fallen mass, unable to get any answer to his anxious questions. One or two groans were all that he could elicit, groans which grew fainter and fainter; he shouted with all his might, but there seemed nothing there to reply—no passing labourer, no one from the village making a short cut across the park, as he had seen them do a hundred times. The mist rose up out of the ground, choking him, and, he thought, stifling his voice; the echoes gave him back the faint sounds which were all he seemed able to make. His throat grew dry and hoarse. Now and then the fallen horse gave a heave, and attempted to fling out, and there would be another scarcely articulate moan. His helplessness went to his very heart; and there, almost within reach, hanging suspended, as it were, between heaven and earth, were the lights of the house, showing with

faint white haloes round them, those lights which had seemed so full of warmth and welcome. When the first of the help-bringers came running, wildly flashing a lantern about, Heathcote's limbs were stiffened and his voice scarcely audible; but it required no explanation to show the state of the case. His horse, which had escaped when he dismounted, had made its way to the stable door, and thus roused a still more effectual alarm. Then the other trembling brute was got to its legs, and the body liberated. The body!—what did they mean? There was no groan now or cry—‘Courage, sir, courage—a little more patience and you will be at home,’ Heathcote heard himself saying. To whom? There was no reply; the groan would have been eloquence. But he could not permit himself to believe that the worst had come. He kept on talking, not knowing what he was doing, while they brought something, he did not know what, to place the motionless figure upon. ‘Softly, softly!’ he cried to the men, and took the limp hand into his own, and continued to speak. He heard himself talking, going along,

repeating always the same words, 'A little longer, only a little longer. Keep up your heart, sir, we are nearly there.' When they had almost reached the door of the house, one of the bearers suddenly burst forth in a kind of loud sob, 'Don't you, sir, don't you now!—don't you see as he'll never hear a spoken word again?'

Then Heathcote stopped mechanically, as he had been speaking mechanically. His hat had been knocked off his head. His dress was wet and muddy, his hair in disorder, his whole appearance wild and terrible. When the light from the door fell full upon him, and Anne stepped forward, he was capable of nothing but to motion her away with his hand. 'What is it?' she said, in an awe-stricken voice. 'Don't send me away. I am not afraid. Did papa find it? He ought to come in at once. Make him come in at once. What is it, Mr. Heathcote? I am not afraid.'

'Send the young lady away, sir,' cried the groom, imperatively. 'Miss Anne, I can't bring him in till you are out o' that. Good Lord, can't you take her away?'

‘I am not afraid,’ she said, very pale, ranging herself on one side to let them pass. Heathcote, who did not know what it was, any more than she did, laid a heavy hand upon her shoulder, and put her, almost roughly, out of the way. ‘I will go,’ she said, frightened. ‘I will go—if only you will make papa come in out of the damp—it is so bad for his—— Ah!’ She fell down upon her knees and her cry rang through all the house. She had seen a sudden light from a lantern out of doors flash across the covered face, the locks of grey hair.

It was not long till everybody knew; from the top to the bottom of the great house the news ran in a moment. John Stokes, the carpenter, returned and mounted his ladder mechanically, to resume his work: then remembered, and got down solemnly and collected his tools, leaving one wreath up and half of the drapery. ‘There won’t be no ball here this time,’ he said to his mate. ‘You bring the step-ladder, Sam.’ This was the first sign that one cycle of time, one reign was over, and another begun.

From that moment Heathcote Mountford’s

position was changed. He felt it before he had gone up the stairs, reverently following that which now he no longer addressed with encouraging human words, but felt to be the unapproachable and solemn thing it was. A man had ridden off for the doctor before they entered the house, but there was no question of a doctor to those who now laid their old master upon his bed. 'I should say instantaneous, or next to instantaneous,' the doctor said when he came; and when he heard of the few groans which had followed the fall, he gave it as his opinion that these had been but unconscious plaints of the body after all sense of pain or knowledge of what was happening had departed. The horse had put his foot into a hole in the spongy wet turf—a thing that might have happened any day, and which it was a wonder did not happen oftener. There were not even the usual questionings and wonderings as to how it came about, which are so universal when death seizes life with so little warning. Mr. Mountford had been in the habit of riding with a loose rein. He had unbounded confidence in his cob,

which, now that the event had proved its danger, a groom came forward to say by no means deserved his confidence, but had two or three times before stumbled with its rider. Heathcote felt that doctors and grooms alike looked to himself with something more than ordinary courtesy and respect. He walked away from the comfortable bedroom now turned into a solemn presence chamber, and all its homely uses intermitted, with a gravity he had not felt before for years. He was not this man's son, scarcely his friend, that his death should affect him so. But, besides the solemnity of the event thus happening in his presence, it changed his position even more than if he had been St. John Mountford's son. It would be barbarous to desert the poor women in their trouble; but how was he to remain here, a comparative stranger, their kinsman but their supplanter, become in a moment the master of the house in which these girls had been born, and which their mother had ruled for twenty years. He went to his room to change his wet and soiled clothes, with a sense of confusion and sadness that

made everything unreal to him. His past as well as that of his kinsman had ended in a moment; his careless easy life was over, the indulgences which he had considered himself entitled to as a man upon whom nobody but Edward had any special claim. Now Edward's claims, for which he had been willing to sacrifice his patrimony, must be put aside perforce. He could no longer think of the arrangement which an hour ago he had been talking of so easily, which was to have been accomplished with so little trouble. It was in no way to be done now. Actually in a moment he had become Mountford of Mount, the representative of many ancestors, the proprietor of an old house and property, responsible to dependents of various kinds, and to the future and to the past. In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye; no idea of this kind had crossed his mind during that long half-hour in the park, which looked like half a year. A fatal issue had not occurred to him. It was not until he had reached the threshold of the house, until he felt hope and help to be near, until he had heard Anne's voice appealing to him to know

what it was, that the whole meaning of it had burst upon him. St. John Mountford dead, and he himself master of the house! It was impossible that, apart from the appalling suddenness of the catastrophe, and the nervous agitation of his own share in it, the death of his cousin even in this startling and pitiful way should plunge him into grief. He was deeply shocked and awed and impressed—sorry for the ladies, stricken so unexpectedly with a double doom, loss of their head, loss of their home—and sorry beyond words for the poor man himself, thus snatched out of life in a moment without preparation, without any suggestion even of what was going to happen; but it was not possible that Heathcote Mountford could feel any private pang in himself. He was subdued out of all thought of himself, except that strange sensation of absolute change. He dressed mechanically, scarcely perceiving what it was he was putting on, in his usual evening clothes which had been laid out for him, just as if he had been dressing for the usual peaceful dinner, his kinsman in the next room doing the same, and the table laid for all the

family party. Notwithstanding the absolute change that had occurred, the revolution in everything, what could a man do but follow mechanically the habitual customs of every day?

He dressed very slowly, sometimes standing by the fire idly for ten minutes at a time, in a half stupor of excitement, restless yet benumbed and incapable of either action or thought; and when this was accomplished went slowly along the long corridors to the drawing-room, still as if nothing had happened, though more had happened than he could fathom or realise. The change had gone down before him and was apparent in every corner of the deserted place. There were two candles burning feebly on the mantelpiece, and the fire threw a little fitful light about, but that was all; and no one was there; of course it was impossible that anyone should be there—but Heathcote was strange to family trouble, and did not know what happened when a calamity like this came crashing down from heaven into the midst of a household of people. Mrs. Mountford's work was lying on the sofa with the

little sheaf of bright-coloured wools, which she had been used to tuck under her arm when she went 'to sit with papa ;' and on the writing-table there was the rough copy of the ball programme, corrected for the printer in Rose's hand. The programmes ; it floated suddenly across his mind to recollect the commission they had received on this subject as they had ridden away ; had they fulfilled it ? he asked himself in his confusion ; then remembered as suddenly how he who was lying upstairs had fulfilled it, and how useless it now was. Ball programmes ! and the giver of the ball lying dead in the house within reach of all the preparations, the garlands, and ornaments. It was incredible, but it was true. Heathcote walked about the dark and empty room in a maze of bewildered trouble which he could not understand, troubled for the dead, and for the women, and for himself, who was neither one nor the other, who was the person to profit by it. It was no longer they who had been born here, who had lived and ruled here for so many years, but he himself who was supreme in the house. It was all his own. The idea neither

pleased him nor excited, but depressed and bewildered him. His own house : and all his easy quiet life in the Albany, and his little luxuries in the way of art and of travel—all over and gone. It seemed unkind to think of this in the presence of calamity so much more serious. Yet how could he help it? When some one came with a soft knock at the door he was startled as if it had been a ghost. It was Saymore who came into the room, neat in his evening apparel, dressed and trim whatever happened, making his little formal bow. ‘The ladies, sir,’ Saymore said, conquering a little huskiness, a little faltering in his own voice, ‘send their compliments and they don’t feel equal to coming down. They hope you will excuse them ; and dinner is served, Mr. Mountford,’ the old man said, his voice ending in a jar of broken sound, almost like weeping. Heathcote went downstairs very seriously, as if he had formed one of the usual procession. He seated himself at the end of the table, still decorated with all its usual prettinesses as for the family meal ; he did all this mechanically, taking the place of the master

of the house, without knowing that he did so, and sitting down as if with ghosts, with all those empty seats round the table and every place prepared. Was it real or was it a dream? He felt that he could see himself as in a picture, sitting there alone, eating mechanically, going through a semblance of the usual meal. The soup was set before him, and then the fish, and then—

‘Saymore, old man,’ Heathcote said suddenly, starting up, ‘I don’t know if this is a tragedy or a farce we are playing—I cannot stand it any longer—take all those things away.’

‘It do seem an awful change, sir, and so sudden,’ cried the old man, frightened by the sudden movement, and by this departure from the rigid rules of ceremony—yet relieved after his first start was over. And then old Saymore began to sob, putting down the little silver dish with the entrée. ‘I’ve been his butler, sir, this thirty years, and ten years in the pantry before that, footman, and born on the property like. And all to be over, sir, in a moment; and he was a good master, sir, though strict. He was very

particular, but always a kind master. It'll be long before we'll get another like him—not but what I beg your pardon, Mr. Mountford. I don't make no doubt but them as serves you will give the same character to you.'

This good wish relieved the oppression with a touch of humour; but Heathcote did not dare to let a smile appear. 'I hope so, sir,' Saymore said. He rubbed his old eyes hard with his napkin. Then he took up again the little silver dish. 'It's sweet-breads, sir, and it won't keep; it was a great favourite with master. Have a little while it's hot. It will disappoint cook if you don't eat a bit; we must eat, whatever happens, sir,' the old man said.

CHAPTER XX.

THE WILL.

IT is needless to dwell upon the gloom of the days that followed this event. Mr. Loseby came over from Hunston, as pale as he was rosy on ordinary occasions, and with a self-reproach that was half pathetic, half ludicrous. 'I said every word of that new will of his would be a nail in his coffin. God forgive me,' he said. 'How was I to know? A man should never take upon himself to prophesy. God knows what a murdering villain he feels if it chances to come true.'

'But nothing you said could have made the horse put his foot in that rabbit-hole,' Heathcote said.

'That is true, that is true,' said the little lawyer: and then he began the same plaint again. But he

was very active and looked after everything, managing the melancholy business of the moment, the inquest, and the funeral. There was a great deal to do. Telegrams flew about the country on all sides, warning the guests invited to the ball of what had happened—yet at least one carriage full of ladies in full ball dress had to be turned back from the lodge on the night when so much gaiety had been expected at Mount. Charley Ashley had come up from the rectory at once and took the position of confidential agent to the ladies, in a way that Heathcote Mountford could not do. He thought it wrong to forsake them, and his presence was needed as mourner at his cousin's funeral; otherwise he would have been glad to escape from the chill misery and solitude that seemed to shut down upon the house which had been so cheerful. He saw nothing of the ladies, save that now and then he would cross the path of Anne, who did not shut herself up like her step-mother and sister. She was very grave, but still she carried on the government of the house. When Heathcote asked her how she was, she answered with

a serious smile, though with quick-coming moisture in her eyes: 'I am not ill at all; I am very well, Mr. Heathcote. Is it not strange one's grief makes no difference to one in that way? One thinks it must, one even hopes it must; but it does not; only my heart feels like a lump of lead.' She was able for all her work, just as usual, and saw Mr. Loseby and gave Charley Ashley the list of all the people to be telegraphed to, or to whom letters must be written. But Mrs. Mountford and Rose kept to their rooms, where all the blinds were carefully closed and every table littered with crape. Getting the mourning ready was always an occupation, and it did them good. They all went in a close carriage to the village church on the day of the funeral, but only Anne followed her father's coffin to the grave. It was when Heathcote stood by her there that he remembered again suddenly the odiousness of the idea that some man or other, a fellow whom nobody knew, had managed to get between Anne Mountford and all the rest of the world. It was not a place for such a thought, yet it came to him in spite of him-

self, when he saw her falter for a moment and instinctively put out his arm to sustain her. She looked round upon him with a look in which gratitude and something like a proud refusal of his aid were mingled. That look suggested to him the question which suddenly arose in his mind, though, as he felt, nothing could be more inappropriate at such a time and place. Where was the fellow? Why was he not here? If he had permitted Anne to be disinherited for his sake, why had he not hurried to her side to support her in her trouble? Heathcote was not the only person who had asked himself this question. The curate had not looked through Anne's list of names before he sent intelligence of Mr. Mountford's death to his friend. The first person of whom he had thought was Cosmo. 'Of course you will come to the rectory,' he telegraphed, sending him the news on the evening of the occurrence. He had never doubted that Cosmo would arrive next morning by the earliest train. All next day while he had been working for them, he had expected every hour the sound of the arrival,

saying to himself, when the time passed for the morning and for the evening trains, that Cosmo must have been from home, that he could not have received the message, that of course he would come to-morrow. But when even the day of the funeral arrived without Cosmo, Charley Ashley's good heart was wrung with mingled wrath and impatience. What could it mean? He was glad, so far as he himself was concerned, for it was a kind of happiness to him to be doing everything for Anne and her mother and sister. He was proud and glad to think that it was natural he should do it, he who was so old a friend, almost like a brother to the girls. But the other, who had a closer claim than that of any brother, who had supplanted Charley and pushed him aside, where was he? On this subject Anne did not say a word. She had written and received various letters, but she did not take anyone into her confidence. And yet there was a something in her eyes, a forlorn look, a resistance of any support, as if she had said to herself, 'Since I have not his arm I will have no one else's support.' Heath-

cote withdrew from her side with a momentary sense of a rebuff. He followed her down the little churchyard path and put her into the carriage, where the others were waiting for her, without a word. Then she turned round and looked at him again. Was it an appeal for forgiveness, for sympathy—and yet for not too much sympathy—which Anne was making? These looks of mingled feeling which have so much in them of the poetry of life, how difficult they are to interpret! how easily it may be that their meaning exists only in the eyes that see them! like letters which may be written carelessly, hastily, but which we weigh, every word of them, in balances of the sanctuary, too fine and delicate for earthly words, finding out so much more than the writer ever thought to say. Perhaps it was only Heathcote's indignant sense that the lover, for whom she had already suffered, should have been by Anne's side in her trouble that made him see so much in her eyes. Charley Ashley had been taking a part in the service; his voice had trembled with real feeling as he read the psalms; and a genuine tear for the man

whom he had known all his life had been in his eye ; but he, too, had seen Anne's looks and put his own interpretation upon them. When all was over, he came out of the vestry where he had taken off his surplice and joined Heathcote. He was going up to Mount, the general centre of everything at this moment. The mourners were going there to luncheon, and afterwards the will was to be read. Already, Mr. Mountford being safely in his grave, covered with wreaths of flowers which everybody had sent, the interest shifted, and it was of this will and its probable revelations that everybody thought.

‘Have you any idea what it is?’ the Curate said ; ‘you were in the house, you must have heard something. It is inconceivable that a just man should be turned into an unjust one by that power of making a will. He was a good man,’ Charley added, with a little gulp of feeling. ‘I have known him since I was *that* high. He never talked very much about it, but he never was hard upon anyone. I don’t think I ever knew him to be hard on anyone. He said little, but I am sure he was a good man at heart.’

Heathcote Mountford did not make any answer; he replied by another question: 'Mr. Douglas is a friend of yours, I hear?'

'Oh, yes, he is a friend of mine: it was I—we are such fools—that brought him. Just think—if it brings harm to Anne, as everybody seems to believe—that I should have to reflect that *I* brought him! I who would cut off a hand!—I see you are thinking how strange it is that he is not here.'

'It is strange,' Heathcote said.

'Strange! strange is not the word. Why, even Willie is here: and he that could have been of such use——. But we must remember that Anne has her own ways of thinking,' the Curate added. 'He wrote half-a-dozen lines to me to say that he was at her orders, that he could not act of himself. Now, whether that meant that she had forbidden him to come—if so, there is a reason at once.'

'I don't think I should have been inclined to take such a reason,' Heathcote said.

The Curate sighed. How could he consider what

he would have done in such circumstances? he knew that he would not have stopped to consider. ‘You don’t know Anne,’ he said; ‘one couldn’t go against her—no, certainly one couldn’t go against her. If she said don’t come, you’d obey, whether you liked it or not.’

‘I don’t think I should. I should do what I thought right without waiting for anyone’s order. What! a woman that has suffered for you, not to be there, not to be by, when she was in trouble! It is inconceivable. Ashley, your friend must be a—he must be, let us say the least——’

‘Hush! I cannot hear any ill of him, he has always been my friend; and Anne—do you think anything higher could be said of a man than that Anne—you know what I mean.’

Heathcote was very sympathetic. He gave a friendly pressure to the arm that had come to be linked in his as they went along. The Curate had not been able to disburden his soul to anyone in these days past, when it had been so sorely impressed upon him that, though he could work for Anne, it was

not his to stand by her and give her the truest support. Heathcote was sympathetic, and yet he could scarcely help smiling within himself at this good faithful soul, who, it was clear, had ventured to love Anne too, and, though so faithful still, had an inward wonder that it had been the other and not himself that had been chosen. The looker-on could have laughed, though he was so sorry. Anne, after all, he reflected, with what he felt to be complete impartiality, though only a country girl, was not the sort of young woman to be appropriated by a curate: that this good, heavy, lumbering fellow should sigh over her choice of another, without seeing in a moment that he and such as he was impossible! However, he pressed Charley's arm in sympathy, even though he could not refrain from this half derision in his heart.

‘He might have stayed at the rectory,’ Charley continued; ‘that is what I proposed—of course he could not have gone to Mount without an invitation. I had got his room all ready; I sent our old man up to meet two trains. I never for a moment

supposed—Willie, of course, never thought twice. He came off from Cambridge as a matter of course.'

'As any one would——' said Heathcote.

'Unless they had been specially forbidden to do it—there is always that to be taken into account.'

Thus talking, they reached the house, where, though the blinds had been drawn up, the gloom was still heavy. The servants were very solemn as they served at table, moving as if in a procession, asking questions about wine and bread in funereal whispers. Old Saymore's eyes were red and his hand unsteady. 'Thirty years butler, and before that ten years in the pantry,' he said to everyone who would listen to him. 'If I don't miss him, who should? and he was always the best of masters to me.' But the meal was an abundant meal, and there were not many people there whose appetites were likely to be affected by what had happened. Mr. Loseby, perhaps, was the one most deeply cast down, for he could not help feeling that he had something to do with it, and that St. John Mountford might still have been

living had he not said that about the words of an unjust will being nails in the coffin of the man who made it. This recollection prevented him from enjoying his meal; but most of the others enjoyed it. Many of the luxurious dainties prepared for the ball supper appeared at this less cheerful table. The cook had thought it a great matter, since there was no ball, that there was the funeral luncheon when they could be eaten, for she could not bear waste. After the luncheon most of the people went away; and it was but a small party which adjourned into the room where Mr. Mountford had spent most of his life, to hear the will read, to which everybody looked forward with excitement. Except Heathcote and the Rector, and Mr. Loseby, there was nobody present save the family. When Anne came, following her stepmother and sister, who went first, clinging together, she saw Charley Ashley in the hall, and called to him as she passed. ‘Come,’ she said softly, holding out her hand to him, ‘I know you will be anxious—come and hear how it is.’ He looked wistfully in her face, wondering if, perhaps,

she asked him because he was Cosmo's friend ; and perhaps Anne understood what the look meant ; he could not tell. She answered him quietly, gravely. ' You are our faithful friend—you have been like our brother. Come and hear how it is.' The Curate followed her in very submissively, glad, yet almost incapable of the effort. Should he have to sit still and hear her put down out of her natural place ? When they were all seated Mr. Loseby began, clearing his throat :

' Our late dear friend, Mr. Mountford, made several wills. There is the one of 1868 still in existence—it is not, I need scarcely say, the will I am about to propound. It was made immediately after his second marriage, and was chiefly in the interests of his eldest daughter, then a child. The will I am about to read is of a very different kind. It is one, I am bound to say, against which I thought it my duty to protest warmly. Words passed between us then which were calculated to impair the friendship which had existed between Mr. Mountford and myself all our lives. He was, however, magnani-

mous. He allowed me to say my say, and he did not resent it. This makes it much less painful to me than it might have been to appear here in a room so associated with him, and make his will known to you. I daresay this is all I need say, except that after this will was executed, on the day indeed of his death, Mr. Mountford gave to me in my office at Hunston two sealed packets, one addressed to Miss Mountford and the other to myself, with a clause inserted on the envelope to the effect that neither was to be opened till Miss Rose should have attained her twenty-first birthday. I calculated accordingly that they must have something to do with the will. Having said this, I may proceed to read the will itself.'

The first part of the document contained nothing very remarkable. Many of the ordinary little bequests, legacies to servants, one or two to public institutions, and all that was to belong to his widow, were very fully and clearly enumerated. The attention of the little company was lulled as all this was read. There was nothing wonderful in it after all. The

commonplace is always comforting: it relieves the strained attention far better than anything more serious or elevated. An unconscious relief came to the minds of all. But Mr. Loseby's voice grew husky and excited when he came to what was the last paragraph—

‘All the rest of my property of every kind, including——[and here there was an enumeration of the unentailed landed property and money in various investments, all described] I leave to my eldest daughter, Anne Mountford——.’ Here the reader made a little involuntary half-conscious pause of excitement—and all the anxious people round him testified the strain relieved, the wonder satisfied, and yet a new rising of wonder and pleasant disappointment. What did it mean? why then had their interest been thus raised, to be brought to nothing? Everything, then, was Anne's after all! There was a stir in which the next words would have been lost altogether, but for a louder clearing of the voice on the part of the reader, calling as it seemed for special attention. He raised his hand evidently with the

same object. 'I leave,' he repeated, 'to my eldest daughter, Anne Mountford—in trust for her sister, Rose——'

Mrs. Mountford, who had been seated in a heap in her chair, a mountain of crape, had roused up at the first words. She raised herself up in her chair forgetful of her mourning, not believing her ears; 'To Anne!' she said under her breath in strange dismay. Had it meant nothing then? Had all this agitation both on her own part and on that of her husband, who was gone, come to nothing, meant nothing? She had suffered much, Mrs. Mountford remembered now. She had been very unhappy; feeling deeply the injustice which she supposed was being done to Anne, even though she knew that Rose was to get the advantage—but now, to think that Rose had no advantage and Anne everything! So many things can pass through the mind in a single moment. She regretted her own regrets, her remonstrances with him (which she exaggerated), the tears she had shed, and her compunctions about Anne. All for nothing. What had he meant by

it? Why had he filled her with such wild hopes to be all brought to nothing? The tears dried up in a moment. She faced Mr. Loseby with a scared pale face, resolving that, whatever happened, she would contest this will, and declare it to be a falsehood, a mistake. Then she, like all the others, was stopped by the cough with which Mr. Loseby recommenced, by the lifting of his finger. ‘Ah!’ she said unconsciously; and then among all these listening, wondering people, fell the other words like thunderbolts out of the skies, ‘in trust—for her sister, Rose——’ They sat and listened all in one gasp of suspended breathing, of eagerness beyond the power of description; but no one took in the words that followed. Anne was to have an income of five hundred a year charged on the property till Rose attained her twenty-first year. Nobody paid any attention to this—nobody heard it even, so great grew the commotion; they began to talk and whisper among themselves before the reader had stopped speaking. Anne to be set aside, and yet employed, made into a kind of steward of her own

patrimony for her sister's benefit ; it was worse than disinheritance, it was cruelty. The Rector turned round to whisper to Heathcote, and Rose flung her arms about her mother. The girl was bewildered. 'What does it mean? what does it mean?' she cried. 'What is that about Anne—and me?'

'Mr. Loseby,' the Rector said, with a trembling voice, 'this cannot be so : there must be some mistake. Our dear friend, whom we have buried to-day, was a good man ; he was a just man. It is not possible ; there must be some mistake.'

'Mistake ! I drew it out myself,' Mr. Loseby said. 'You will not find any mistake in it. There was a mistake in his own mind. I don't say anything against that ; but in the will there's no mistake. I wish there was. I would drive a coach and six through it if I could ; but it's all fast and strong. Short of a miracle, nobody will break that will—though I struggled against it. He was as obstinate as a mule, as they all are—all the Mountfords.'

'Mr. Loseby,' said Mrs. Mountford, 'I did not

approve any more than you did. It was not any doing of mine. I protested against it; but my husband—my husband had his reasons.'

'There are no reasons that could justify this,' said the tremulous old Rector; 'it is a shame and a sin; it ought not to be. When a man's will is all wrong, the survivors should agree to set it right. It should not be left like that; it will bring a curse upon all who have anything to do with it,' said the old man, who was so timid and so easily abashed. 'I am not a lawyer. I don't know what the law will permit; but the Gospel does not permit such injustice as this.'

Mr. Loseby had pushed his spectacles up on his forehead and listened with an astonishment which was tinged first with awe, then with amusement. The old Rector, feeblest of men and preachers! The lawyer gazed at him as at a curiosity of nature. It was a fine thing in its way. But to attack a will of his, John Loseby's! He smiled at the folly, though he sympathised with the courage. After all, the old fellow had more in him than anybody thought.

Mrs. Mountford was roused too beyond her wont. ‘My husband had his reasons,’ she said, her pale face growing red; ‘he never did anything without thought. I would not change what he had settled, not for all the world, not for a kingdom. I interfere to set a will aside! and *his* will! I don’t think you know what you are saying. No one could have such a right.’

‘Then it will bring a curse and no blessing,’ said the Rector, getting up tremulously. ‘I have nothing to do here; I said so at the first. Anne, my dear excellent child, this is a terrible blow for you. I wish I could take you out of it all. I wish—I wish that God had given me such a blessing as you for my daughter, my dear.’

Anne rose up and gave him her hand. All the usual decorums of such a meeting were made an end of by the extraordinary character of the revelation which had been made to them.

‘Thank you, dear Mr. Ashley; but never think of me,’ Anne said. ‘I knew it would be so. And papa, poor papa, had a right to do what he pleased.’

We spoke of it together often; he never thought it would come to this. How was he to think what was to happen? and so soon—so soon. I feel sure,' she said, her eyes filling with tears, 'it was for this, and not for pain, that he groaned after he fell.'

'He had need to groan,' said the Rector, shaking his head—'he had need to groan! I hope it may not be laid to his charge.' Mr. Ashley was too much moved to recollect the ordinary politenesses; he pushed his chair away, back to the wall, not knowing what he was doing. 'Come, Charley!' he said, 'come, Charley! I told you we had nothing to do here. We cannot mend it, and why should we be in the midst of it? It is more than I can bear. Come, Charley—unless you can be of use.'

But Mrs. Mountford felt it very hard that she should thus be disapproved of by her clergyman. It compromised her in every way. She began to cry, settling down once more into the midst of her crape. 'I don't know why you should turn against me,' she said, 'Mr. Ashley. I had nothing to do with it. I told him it would make me wretched if he punished

Anne ; but you cannot ask me to disapprove of my husband, and go against my husband, and he only to-day—only to-day——’

Here she was choked by genuine tears. Rose had kept close by her mother’s side all the time. She cried occasionally, but she gave her attention closely to all that was going on, and the indignation of the bystanders at her own preferment puzzled her somewhat narrow understanding. Why should not she be as good an heiress as Anne? Why should there be such a commotion about her substitution for her sister? She could not make out what they meant. ‘I will always stand by you, mamma,’ she said, tremulously. ‘Come upstairs. I do not suppose we need stay any longer, Mr. Loseby? There is nothing for us to do.’

‘Nothing at all, Miss Rose,’ said the lawyer. The men stood up while the ladies went away, Mrs. Mountford leaning on her child’s arm. Anne, too, stood aside to let them pass. There was no reason perhaps why they should have said anything to her ; but she looked at them wistfully, and her lip

trembled a little. There were two of them, but of her only one. One alone to face the world. She cast a glance round upon the others who were all of her faction, yet not one able to stand by her, to give her any real support. Once more, two of them at least felt that there was an appeal in her eyes—not to them, nor to any one—a secret sense of the cruelty of—what?—circumstances, fate, which left her quite alone at such a crisis. Then she, too, turned to the lawyer. ‘May I go too?’ she said. ‘No doubt there will be a great deal for me to learn and to do; but I need not begin, need I, to-day?’

‘My dear Miss Anne,’ cried Mr. Loseby, ‘I don’t know that you need to accept the trust at all. I said to him I should be disposed to throw it into Chancery, and to make your sister a ward of the Court. I don’t know that you need to accept it at all——’

‘Oh, yes,’ she said, with a smile. ‘I will accept it. I will do it. My father knew very well that I would do it; but I need not begin, need I, to-day?’

CHAPTER XXI.

WHEN ALL WAS OVER.

THE night dropped over Mount very darkly, as dark a November night as ever fell, fog and damp heaviness over everything outside, gloom and wonder and bewilderment within. Mr. Loseby stayed all night and dined with Heathcote, to his great relief. Nobody else came downstairs. Mrs. Mountford, though she felt all the natural and proper grief for her great loss, was not by any means unable to appear, and Rose, who was naturally tired of her week's seclusion, would have been very glad to do so ; but her mother was of opinion that they ought not to be capable of seeing anyone on the funeral day, and their meal was brought up to their rooms as before. They played a melancholy little game of *béziq*ue together

afterwards, which was the first symptom of returning life which Mrs. Mountford had permitted herself to be able for. Anne had joined them in Mrs. Mountford's sitting-room, and had shared their dinner, which still was composed of some of the delicacies from the ball supper. In winter everything keeps so long. There had been very little conversation between them there, for they did not know what to say to each other. Mrs. Mountford, indeed, made a little set speech, which she had conned over with some care and solemnity. 'Anne,' she had said, 'it would not become me to say a word against what dear papa has done; but I wish you to know that I had no hand in it. I did not know what it was till to-day: and, for that matter, I don't know now. I was aware that he was displeased and meant to make some change, and I entreated him not to do so. That was all I knew ——'

'I am sure you had nothing to do with it,' Anne said gently; 'papa spoke to me himself. He had a right to do as he pleased. I for one will not say a word against it. I crossed him, and it was all

in his hands. I knew what the penalty was. I am sure it has been a grief to you for some time back.'

'Indeed, you only do me justice, Anne,' cried her stepmother, and a kiss was given and received; but perhaps it was scarcely possible that it should be a very warm caress. After they had eaten together Anne went back to her room, saying she had letters to write, and Rose and her mother played that game at *béziq*ue. It made the evening pass a little more quickly than if they had been seated on either side of the fire reading good books. And when the *béziq*ue was over Mrs. Mountford went to bed. There are many people who find in this a ready way of getting through their superfluous time. Mrs. Mountford did not mind how soon she went to bed; but this is not an amusement which commends itself to youth. When her mother was settled for the night, Rose, though she had promised to go too, felt a little stirring of her existence within her roused, perhaps, by the dissipation of the *béziq*ue. She allowed that she was tired; but still, after her

mother was tucked up for the night, she felt too restless to go to bed. Where could she go but to Anne's room, which had been her refuge all her life, in every trouble? Anne was still writing letters, or at least one letter, which looked like a book, there was so much of it, Rose thought. She came behind her sister, and would have looked over her shoulder, but Anne closed her writing-book quickly upon the sheet she was writing. 'Are you tired, dear?' she said—just, Rose reflected, like mamma.

'I am tired—of doing nothing, and of being shut up. I hope mamma will let us come downstairs to-morrow,' said Rose. Then she stole a caressing arm round her sister's waist. 'I wish you would tell me, Anne. What is it all about, and what does it mean?'

'It is not so easy to tell. I did not obey papa——'

'Are you sorry, Anne?'

'Sorry? very sorry to have vexed him, dear. If I had known he would be with us only such a little time—but one never knows.'

‘I should have thought you would have been too angry to be sorry——’

‘Angry—when he is dead?’ said Anne, with quick rising tears. ‘Oh, no! if he had been living I might have been angry; but now to think he cannot change it, and perhaps would do anything to change it——’

Rose did not understand this. She said in a little, petulant voice, ‘Is it so dreadfully wrong to give it to me instead of you?’

‘There is no question of you or me,’ said Anne, ‘but of justice. It was my mother’s. You are made rich by what was hers, not his or anyone else’s. This is where the wrong lies. But don’t let us talk of it. I don’t mean to say a word against it, Rose.’

Then Rose roamed about the room, and looked at all the little familiar pictures and ornaments she knew. The room was more cheerful than her mother’s room, with all its heavy hangings, in which she had been living for a week. After a few minutes she came back and leaned upon Anne’s shoulder again.

‘I wish you would tell me what it means. What is In Trust? Have you a great deal to do with me?’ she said.

Anne’s face lighted up a little. ‘I have everything to do with you,’ she said; ‘I am your guardian, I think. I shall have to manage your money and look after all your interests. Though I am poor and you are rich, you will not be able to do anything without me.’

‘But that will not last for ever,’ said Rose, with a return of the little, petulant tone.

‘No; till you come of age. Didn’t you hear to-day what Mr. Loseby said? and look, Rosie, though it will break your heart, look here.’

Anne opened her desk and took out from an inner drawer the sealed packet which Mr. Mountford had himself taken to the lawyer on the day of his death. The tears rose to her eyes as she took it out, and Rose, though curiosity was so strong in her as almost to quench emotion, felt something coming in her throat at the first sight of her father’s writing, so familiar as it was. ‘For my daughter Anne, not

to be opened till Rose's twenty-first birthday.' Rose read it aloud, wondering. She felt something come in her throat, but yet she was too curious, too full of the novelty of her own position, to be touched as Anne was. 'But that may change it all over again,' she said.

'It is not likely; he would not have settled things one day and unsettled them the next; especially as nothing had happened in the meantime to make him change again.'

Rose looked very curiously, anxiously, at the letter. She took it in her hand and turned it over and over. 'It must be about me, anyhow, I suppose——'

'Yes,' said Anne, with a faint smile, 'or me; perhaps he might think, after my work for you was over, that I might want some advice.'

'I suppose you will be married long before that?' said Rose, still poising the letter in her hands.

'I don't know—it is too early to talk of what is going to be done. You are tired, Rosie—go to bed.'

'Why should I be tired more than you? You

have been doing a great deal, and I have been doing nothing. That is like mamma's way of always supposing one is tired, and wants to go to bed. I hate bed. Anne, I suppose you will get married—there can be nothing against it, now—only I don't believe he has any money: and if you have no money either——'

'Don't let us talk on the subject, dear—it is too early, it hurts me—and I want to finish my letter. Sit down by the fire—there is a very comfortable chair, and a book—if you don't want to go to bed.'

'Are you writing to Mr. Douglas, Anne?'

Anne answered only with a slight nod of her head. She had taken her pen into her hand. She could not be harsh to her little sister this day above all others, in which her little sister had been made the means of doing her so much harm—but it cost her an effort to be patient. Rose, for her part, had no science to gain information from the inflections of a voice. 'Why wasn't he here to-day?' was the next thing she said.

'Rosie, dear, do you know I have a great deal to

do? Don't ask me so many questions,' Anne said, piteously. But Rose was more occupied by her own thoughts than by anything her sister said.

'He ought to have been at the funeral,' she said, with that calm which was always so astonishing to her sister. 'I thought when you went to the grave you must have known you were to meet him there. Mamma thought so, too.'

These words sank like stones into Anne's heart; but there was a kind of painful smile on her face. 'You thought I was thinking of meeting anyone there? Oh, Rose, did you think me so cold-hearted? I was thinking only of him who was to be laid there.'

'I don't mean that you are cold-hearted. Of course we were all wretched enough. Mamma said it would have been too much either for her or me; but you were always the strongest, and then of course we expected Mr. Douglas would be there.'

'You do not know him,' cried Anne, with a little vehemence; 'you do not know the delicacy, the feeling he has. How was he to come intruding himself the moment that my father was gone—thrusting

himself even into his presence, after being forbidden. A man of no feeling might have done it, but he——. Rosie, please go away. I cannot talk to you any more.'

'Oh, was that how it was?' Rose was silenced for the moment. She went away to the seat by the fire which her sister had pointed out to her. Anne had not noticed that she had still the letter in her hands. And then she was quiet for some time, while her sister resumed her writing. Cosmo's conduct soon went out of Rose's head, while she occupied herself with the other more important matter which concerned herself. What might be in this letter of papa's? Probably some new change, some new will, something quite different. 'If I am not to be the heiress after all, only have the name of it for three years, what will be the use?' Rose said to herself. She was very sensible in her limited way. 'I would rather not have any deception or have the name of it, if it is going to be taken away from me just when I should want to have it.' She looked at the seals of the packet with longing eyes. If they would only

melt—if they would but break of themselves. ‘I wonder why we shouldn’t read it now?’ she said. ‘It is not as if we were other people, as if we were strangers—we are his own daughters, his two only children—he could not have meant to hide anything from us. If you will open and read it, and tell me what it is, we need not tell anyone—we need not even tell mamma.’

‘What are you talking of, Rose?’

‘I am talking of papa’s letter, of course. Why should you keep it, not knowing what harm it may be going to do——Anne! you hurt me—you hurt me!’ Rose cried.

Anne sprang to her feet with the natural impetuosity which she tried so hard to keep under, and seized the letter out of her sister’s hands.

‘You must never speak nor think of anything of the kind,’ she cried; ‘my father’s wish, his last charge to us——’

‘I am sure,’ said Rose, beginning to cry, ‘you need not speak—it is you that refused to do what he told you, not I? This is quite innocent; what could

it matter? It can't vex him now, whatever we do, for he will never know. I would not have disobeyed him when he was living—that is, not in anything serious, not for the world—but now, what can it matter, when he will never, never know?’

The utter scepticism and cynicism of the little childish creature, crying by the fire, did not strike Anne. It was only a naughtiness, a foolishness upon the child's part, nothing more. She restored the packet to the private drawer and locked it with energy, closing down and locking the desk, too. It was herself she blamed for having shown the packet, not Rose, who knew no better. But now it was clear that she must do, what indeed she generally had to do, when Rose claimed her attention—give up her own occupation, and devote herself to her sister. She came and sat down by her, leaving the letter in which her heart was. And Rose, taking advantage of the opportunity, tormented her with questions. When at last she consented to retire to her room, Anne could do nothing but sit by the fire, making a vain attempt to stifle the more serious questions, which

were arising, whether she would or no, in her own heart. ‘Rose=prose,’ she had tried hard to say to herself, as so often before ; but her lips quivered, so that a smile was impossible. She sat there for a long time after, trying to recover herself. She had arrived at a crisis of which she felt the pain without understanding the gravity of it. And indeed the sudden chaos of confusion and wonder into which she had wandered, she could not tell how, had no doubt so deadened the blow of the strange will to her, as to give her a heroism which was half stupidity, as so many heroisms are. She, too, had expected, like all the world, that Cosmo would have come to her at once—if not to Mount, yet to the rectory, where his friends would have received him. She had taken it for granted—though she had not said a word on the subject to anyone, nor even to herself, feeling that to see him and feel him near her would be all the greater consolation if she had never said she looked for it, even in her own heart. She had not given his name to Charley Ashley as one of those to be informed by telegraph, nor had she mentioned his

name at all, though she seemed to herself to read it in a continual question in the Curate's eyes. A chill had stolen over her when she heard nothing of him all the first long day. She had not permitted herself to ask or to think, but she had started at every opening door, and listened to every step outside, and even, with a pang which she would not acknowledge, had looked out through a crevice of the closed shutters, with an ache of wondering anguish in her heart, to see the Curate coming up the avenue alone on the second morning. But when Cosmo's letter came to her, by the ordinary return of post, Anne tried to say to herself that of course he was right and she was wrong—nay more than that—that she had known exactly all through which was the more delicate and noble way, and that it was this. How could he come to Mount, he who had been turned away from it (though this was not quite true), who had been the cause of her disinheritance? How could he present himself the moment the father, who had objected to him so strenuously, was dead? Cosmo laid the whole case before her with what seemed the noblest

frankness, in that letter. 'I am in your hands,' he said. 'The faintest expression of a wish from you will change everything. Say to me, "Come," and I will come, how gladly I need not say—but without that word, how can I intrude into the midst of a grief which, believe me, my dearest, I shall share, for it will be yours, but which by all the rest of the world will seem nothing but a deliverance and relief to me.' Anne, who had not allowed herself to say a word, even to her own soul, of the sickening of disappointment and wonder in her, who had stood bravely dumb and refused to be conscious that she had expected him, felt her heart leap up with a visionary triumph of approval, when this letter came. Oh, how completely and nobly right he was! How superior in his instinctive sense of what it was most delicately honourable and fit to do, in such an emergency, to any other, or to herself even, who ought to have known better.

She wrote instantly to say, 'You are right, dear Cosmo. You are more than right; how could anyone be so blind as not to see that this is what you

ought to, what you must have done, and that nothing else was possible?' And since then she had said these words over to herself again and again—and had gone about all her occupations more proudly, more erect and self-sustaining, because of this evident impossibility that he should have been there, which the heavier people about, without his fine perceptions and understanding, did not seem to see. As a matter of fact, she said to herself, she wanted no help. She was not delicate or very young, like Rose, but a full-grown woman, able for anything, worthy of the confidence that had been placed in her. Nevertheless, there had been a moment, when Heathcote had put out his arm to support her at the side of the grave, when the sense of Cosmo's absence had been almost more than she could bear, and his excuse had not seemed so sufficient as before. She had rejected the proffered support. She had walked firmly away, proving to all beholders that she was able to do all that she had to do, and to bear all that she had to bear; but nevertheless the pang and chill of this moment had

shaken Anne's moral being. She had read in Heathcote's eyes some reflection of the indignant question, 'Where is *that* fellow?' She had discerned it in Charley Ashley's every look and gesture—and there had been a dull anticipation and echo of their sentiments in her heart. She had, as it were, struck against it, and her strength and her nerves were shaken by the encounter. The after thrill of this, still going through and through her, had made her almost indifferent to the shock given by the reading of the will. She had not cared the least about that. She had been dulled to it, and was past feeling it—though it was not in the least what she had expected, and had so much novelty and individuality of vengeance in it as to have given a special blow had she been able to receive it. Even now when her intelligence had fully taken it in, her heart was still untouched by it—*Un chiodo caccia un' altro*. But she had slowly got the better of the former shock. She had re-read Cosmo's letters, of which she received one every day, and had again come to see that his conduct was actuated by the

very noblest motives. Then had come Rose's visit and all those questionings, and once more Anne had felt as if she had run against some one in the dark, and had been shaken by the shock. She sat trying to recover herself, trembling and incapable for a long time, before she could go and finish her letter. And yet there was much in that letter that she was anxious Cosmo should know.

While all this was going on upstairs, the two gentlemen were sitting over their dinner, with still a little excitement, a little gloom hovering over them, but on the whole comfortable, returning to their usual ways of thinking and usual calm of mind. Even to those most intimately concerned, death is one of the things to which the human mind most easily accustoms itself. Mr. Loseby was more new than Heathcote was to the aspect of the house, from which for the time all its usual inhabitants and appearances had gone. He said 'Poor Mountford!' two or three times in the course of dinner, and stopped to give an account of the claret on which the late master of the house had much prided him-

self. ‘And very good it is,’ Mr. Loseby said. ‘I suppose, unless the widow reserves it for her own use—and I don’t believe she knows it from Gladstone claret at 12s. a dozen—there will be a sale.’ This intruded a subject which was even more interesting than the will and all that must flow from it. ‘What do you intend to do?’

Now Heathcote Mountford was not very happy, any more than the other members of the household. He had gone through a disappointment too. Heathcote had but one person in the world who had been of any importance in his past life, and that was his young brother Edward, now at Sandhurst. It had been settled that Edward and a number of his comrades should come to Mount for the dance, but when Heathcote had signified his wish, after all this was over, that Edward should come for the funeral, the young man had refused. ‘Why should I? You will all be as dull as ditch-water; and I never knew our kinsman as you call him. You are dismal by nature, Heathcote, old boy,’ the young man had said, ‘but not I—why should I come to be another

mute ? Can't you find enough without me ?' Edward, who was very easily moved when his own concerns were in question, was as obstinate as the rest of the Mountfords as to affairs which did not concern himself. He paid no attention to his brother's plea for a little personal consolation. And Heathcote, who regarded the young fellow as a father regards his spoiled child, was disappointed. To be sure, he represented to himself, Edward too had been disappointed ; he had lost his ball, which was a thing of importance to him, and the settlement of his affairs, for which he had been looking with such confidence, was now indefinitely postponed. Edward had not been an easy boy to manage ; he had not been a very good boy. He had been delicate and wayward and spoiled—spoiled as much by the elder brother who was thoroughly aware how wrong it was, as by the mother who had been foolish about Edward, and had died when he was still so young that spoiling did not matter much. Heathcote had carried the process on ; he had vowed to himself that, so far as was possible, the delicate boy should

not miss his mother's tenderness ; and he had kept his word, and ruined the boy. Edward had got everything he wanted from his brother, so long as he wanted only innocent things ; and afterward he had got for himself, and insisted on getting, things that were not so innocent ; and the result was that, though still only twenty, he was deeply in debt. It was for this that Heathcote had made up his mind to sacrifice the succession to Mount. Sacrifice—it was not a sacrifice ; he cared nothing for Mount, and Edward cared less than nothing. Even afterwards, when he had begun to look upon Mount with other eyes, he had persevered in his intention to sacrifice it ; but now all that had come to an end. Whether he would or not, Heathcote Mountford had become the possessor of Mount, and Edward's debts were very far from being paid. In these circumstances Heathcote felt it specially hard upon him that his brother did not come to him, to be with him during this crisis. It was natural ; he did not blame Edward ; and yet he felt it almost as a woman might have felt it. This threw a gloom over him

almost more than the legitimate gloom, which, to be sure, Heathcote by this time had recovered from. It was not in nature that he could have felt it very deeply after the first shock. His own vexations poured back upon his mind, when Mr. Loseby said, ‘What do you intend to do?’

‘You will say what have I to do with that?’ the old lawyer said. ‘And yet, if you will think, I have to do with it more or less. We have to get the family out on our side. It’s early days—but if you should wish an early settlement——’

‘I don’t mind if it is never settled,’ said Heathcote; ‘what should I do with this great place? It would take all my income to keep it up. If they like to stay, they are very welcome. I care nothing about it. Poor St. John had a handsome income from other sources. He was able to keep it up.’

‘Good Lord, Mr. Heathcote,’ said the lawyer, ‘why didn’t you come a year ago? A young man should not neglect his relations; it always turns out badly. If you had come here a year ago, in the natural course of events, I could have laid a thousand pounds

upon it that you and Anne would have taken a fancy to each other. You seem to me exactly cut out for each other—the same ways, a little resemblance even in looks——’

‘You pay me too great a compliment,’ said Heathcote, with an uneasy laugh, colouring in spite of himself; ‘and you must let me say that my cousin’s name is sacred, and that, old friend as you are, you ought not to discuss her so.’

‘I—oughtn’t to talk of Anne? Why, she has sat upon my knee,’ said Mr. Loseby. ‘Ah! why didn’t you come a year ago? I don’t say now that if it was to your mind to make yourself comfortable as poor Mountford did, in the same way, there’s still the occasion handy. No, I can’t say that,’ said the old lawyer, ‘I am too sick of the whole concern. Anne treated like that, and Rose, little Rose, that bit of a girl!——However,’ he said, recovering himself, ‘I ought to remember that after all you can’t take the same interest in them as I do, and that we were talking of your own concerns.’

‘I take a great interest in my cousins,’ said

Heathcote gravely. ‘Do you know I believe poor St. John meant to buy my interest, to accept my proposal, and leave Mount to his eldest daughter.’

‘No ; you don’t think so? Well, that might have been a way out of it—that might have been a way out of it—now that you recall it to me the same thought struck myself; at least I thought he would take advantage of that to make a new settlement, after he had taken his fling and relieved his mind with this one. Ah, poor man, he never calculated on the uncertainty of life—he never thought of that rabbit-hole. God help us, what a thing life is! at the mercy of any rolling stone, and any falling branch, of a poor little rabbit’s burrowing, or even a glass of water. And what a thing is man! as Hamlet says; it’s enough to make anyone moralise: but we never take a bit of warning by it—never a bit. And so you really think he meant to take Mount off your hands and settle it on Anne? I don’t think he had gone so far as that—but I’ll tell you what we’ll do, we’ll tell her so, and that will make her happy. She’s not like other people, she

is all wrong here,' said Mr. Loseby, laughing, with the tears in his eyes, and tapping his forehead. 'She has a bee in her bonnet, as the Scotch say. She is a fool, that is what Anne is—she will be as pleased as if he had left her a kingdom. The worst thing of it all to that girl is, that her father has made himself look like a tyrant and a knave—which he wasn't, you know—he wasn't, poor Mountford! though he has done his best to make himself appear so. Once give her something to build up his character again upon, some ground, it doesn't matter how fanciful it is, and she'll be happy. She won't mind her own loss, bless you,' said the old lawyer, half crying, 'she is such a fool!'

'Mr. Loseby,' said Heathcote with an emotion which surprised him, 'I think you are giving my cousin Anne the most beautiful character that ever was.'

'Sir,' cried Mr. Loseby, not ashamed to dry his eyes, 'whoever said anything different? Did you ever hear anything different? As long as I have known the world I have never known but one Anne

Mountford. Oh, Mr. Heathcote, Mr. Heathcote,' he added, his voice turning into tremulous laughter, 'what a thousand pities that you did not make your appearance a year before!'

Heathcote got up from his chair with a start, and walked about the room in a nervous impatience, for which he could give no reason to himself. Was it that he, too, wished he had come to Mount a year sooner? He left the old man to finish his wine, and roamed about, now pausing a moment with his back to the fire, now extending his walk into the dark corners. He had lit his cigarette, which furnished him with an excuse—but he was not thinking of his cigarette. What he was thinking was—What the devil did that fellow mean by staying away now? Why didn't he come and stand by her like a man? What sort of a pitiful cur was he that he didn't come, now he was free to do it, and stand by her like a man? He disposed of Charley Ashley's mild plea with still greater impatience. Perhaps she had forbidden him to come. 'Would I have been kept away by any forbidding?' Heathcote said to himself

without knowing it. Then he came back from the corners in which such suggestions lay, feeling uneasy, feeling wroth and uncomfortable, and took his stand again before the fire. 'Perhaps you will give me a little advice about the money I wanted,' he said to Mr. Loseby. This was safer on the whole than suffering himself to stray into foolish fancies as to what he would have done, or would not have done, supposing an impossible case—supposing he had made his appearance a year sooner; before there was any complication of any unsatisfactory 'fellow' with the image of his cousin Anne.

CHAPTER XXII.

SOPHISTRY.

It is not to be supposed that the events which had moved so deeply the household at Mount, and all its connections, should have passed lightly over the one other person who, of all to whom the Mountfords were familiar, could alone feel himself a principal in the important matters involved. Douglas had looked on from a distance, keeping himself out of all the immediate complications, but not the less had he looked on with a beating heart, more anxious than it is possible to say, and, though still quiescent, never less than on the verge of personal action, and never clear that it would not have been wisest for him to plunge into the midst of it from the first. His position had not been easy, nor his mind composed, from the beginning. When he had heard of

Mr. Mountford's death his agitation was great. He had not become indifferent to Anne. The thought that she was in trouble, and he not near her, was no pleasant thought. All the first evening, after he had received Charley Ashley's telegram, he had spent in a prolonged argument with himself. He knew from Anne that something had been done, though he did not know what; that, according to her father's own words, the property had been taken from her and given to her sister. She had told him what her father said, that it was understood between them that this transfer was to be made, and that she had no longer any interest in the fortune which had once been so certainly considered hers. Cosmo had not admired the ease with which she spoke on this question. He had gnashed his teeth at Anne's unworldliness, at her calm consent to her father's arrangements, and ready making up of the quarrel with him. She was his love, his dearest, in all truth the one woman in the world who had captivated his affections, and made him feel that he had no longer any choice, any preference, that did not point to

her ; but he had acted like a fool all the same, he thought. In some minds, perhaps in most minds, this conviction can exist without in the least affecting the reality of the love which lies behind. He loved Anne, but his love did not make him think that everything she did was well done. She had behaved like a fool. Old Mr. Loseby said the same thing, but he said it with glistening eyes, and with an appreciation of the folly and its character such as Cosmo was altogether incapable of.

Nevertheless, Anne's lover did not feel his love materially lessened by this conviction. He gnashed his teeth at it, thinking, 'Had I but been there!' though he knew very well that, had he been there, he could have done nothing to change it. But one thing he could do : when she was his wife he could put a stop to such follies. There should be none of this ridiculous magnanimity, this still more ridiculous indifference, then. In writing to her he had felt that it was difficult to keep all vestige of his disapproval out of his letters, but he had managed

pretty nearly to do so ; feeling wisely that it was useless to preach to her on such a subject, that only his own constant guidance and example, or, better still, his personal conduct of her affairs, could bring real good sense into them. He had been anxious enough while this was going on, not seeing what was to come, feeling only certain that, love as he might, he could no more marry his love without a penny than he could make himself Lord Chief Justice. It was out of the question : in his position marriage was difficult in the best of circumstances ; but to marry a wife without a fortune of her own, without enough to keep her comfortable, was simply folly not to be thought of. Anne's dreams of romantic toil, of the enthusiasm of hard work into which a man might rush for the sake of a woman he loved, and of the heroic life the two could lead, helping each other on to fame and fortune at the end, were to him as silly as a nursery tale. Men who made their own way like that, overcoming every obstacle, and forcing their way to the heights of ambition, were men who did it by temperament, not

by love, or for any sentimental motive. Cosmo knew that he was not the sort of man to venture on such a madness. His wife must have enough to provide for her own comfort, to keep her as she had been accustomed to be kept, or else he could have no wife at all.

This had given him enough to think of from the very beginning of the engagement, as has been already shown. His part was harder than Anne's, for she had fanciful ups and downs as was natural to her, and if she sometimes was depressed would be next moment up in the clouds, exulting in some visionary blessedness, dreaming out some love in a cottage or still more ludicrous love in chambers, which his sterner reason never allowed to be possible, not for an hour; therefore his was the hardest burden of the two. For he was not content to part with her, nor so much as to think of parting with her; and yet, with all his ingenuity, he could not see how, if her father did not relent, it could be done. And the worst thing now was that the father

was beyond all power of relenting—that he was dead, absolutely dead, allowed to depart out of this world having done his worst. Not one of the family, not one of Mr. Mountford's dependents, was more stunned by the news than Cosmo. Dead! he read over the telegram again and again—he could not believe his eyes—it seemed impossible that such a piece of wickedness could have been accomplished; he felt indignant and furious at everybody concerned, at Mr. Mountford for dying, at God for permitting it. A man who had made such a mistake, and to whom it was absolutely indispensable that he should be allowed time to repent of his mistake and amend it and instead of this he had died—he had been permitted to die.

The news threw Cosmo into a commotion of mind which it is impossible to describe. At one period of the evening he had thrown some things into a bag, ready to start, as Ashley expected him to do; then he took another thought. If he identified himself with everything that was being done now, how could he ever withdraw after, how postpone

ulterior proceedings? This, however, is a brutal way of stating even the very first objection that occurred to Cosmo. Sophistry would be a poor art if it only gave an over-favourable view of a man's actions and motives to the outside world and left himself unconvinced and undeceived. His was of a much superior kind. It did a great deal more for him. When its underground industry was once in full action it bewildered himself. It was when he was actually closing his bag, actually counting out the contents of his purse to see if he had enough for the journey, that this other line of reasoning struck him. If he thus rushed to Mount to take his place by Anne's side, and yet was not prepared (and he knew he was not prepared) to urge, nay, almost force himself upon Anne's immediate acceptance as her husband, would he not be doing a wrong to Anne? He would compromise her; he would be holding her up to the world as the betrothed of a poor man, a man not so well off as to be able to claim her, yet holding her bound. He paused, really feeling this to throw a new light upon the

subject. Would it be acting honourably by Anne? Would it, in her interest, be the right thing to do?

This, however, was not all or half the mental process he had to go through. He paused for her sake; yet not in this way could the reason of his hesitation be made clear to her. She would not mind being 'compromised.' She would not insist upon the fulfilment of their engagement. He had to think of some other reason to prove to her that it was better he should stay away. He made out his case for her, gradually, at more cost of thought than the plea which had convinced himself; but at the end it satisfied him as full of very cogent and effective reasoning. The whole matter opened up before him as he pondered it. He began to ask himself, to ask her, how he could, as a man of honour, hurry to Mount as soon as the breath was out of the body of the master of the house who had rejected and sent him away? How could he thrust himself into Mr. Mountford's presence as soon as he was dead and incapable of resenting it—he, who when living would

have refused to admit him, would have had nothing to say to him? He put back his money into his purse, and slowly undid his bag and threw out his linen as these thoughts arose and shaped themselves in his mind. In either point of view it would be impossible to do it; in either point of view manly self-denial, honour, and consideration for all parties required that in this emergency he should not think of what was pleasant either to her or himself. It was a crisis too important for the mere action of instinctive feelings. Of course he would like to be with her—of course she would like to have him by her. But here was something more than what they would like, a world of things to be considered. To say that Cosmo, deep down at the bottom of his heart, was not aware that there might be another larger, simpler mode of considering the question which would sweep all these intellectual cobwebs away and carry him off in a moment to Anne's side, to stand by her in defiance of all prudential motives, would be untrue. It is the curse of sophistry that this sense of something better, this con-

sciousness of a fundamental flaw in its arguments, is seldom quite obliterated ; but at the same time it was far more in accordance with his nature to act according to the more elaborate, and not according to the simpler system. He satisfied himself, if not completely, yet sufficiently to reconcile himself to what he was doing ; and he satisfied Anne so far at least as her first response, her first apprehension was concerned. ‘Dear Cosmo, you are right, you are right, you are more than right, as you always are,’ she had said with a kind of enthusiasm, in her first letter. ‘They say that women have more delicate perceptions, but that only shows how little people know. I see in a moment the truth and the wisdom and the fine honour of what you say. I am capable of understanding it at least, but I feel how far you go beyond me in delicacy of feeling as well as in other things. No, no ! you must not come ; respect for my dear father forbids it, although I cannot but hope and feel certain that my father himself knows better now.’ This had been her first reply to his explanation ; and he had been satisfied then that

what he had done, and the reasons he had given, were in all senses the best.

It was now, however, the day after Mr. Mountford's funeral, and everything had progressed beyond that event. Till it is over, the dead is still the first person to be considered, and all things refer to him as to one who is the centre of every thought. But when the earth has closed over his head then an inevitable change occurs. He is left there where he lies—be he the most important, the most cherished and beloved—and other interests push in and take the first place. Cosmo sat in his chambers on the evening of that day, and read his letters with a distinct consciousness of this difference, though he himself had taken no immediate share in the excitements of the dying and the burial. There was a long, very long letter from Anne, and a shorter one from Charley Ashley, which he read first with a slight sensation of alarm, notwithstanding his anxiety to hear about the will ; for Cosmo could not but feel, although he was satisfied himself with the reasons for his conduct, and though Anne was satisfied, that

such a rude simpleton as the curate might possibly take a different view. He held Anne's letter in his hand while he read the other. Charley was very brief. He was not much of a correspondent in any case.

'We got over the funeral well on the whole,' Charley wrote. 'The others only went to the church, but she followed her father to the grave as you would expect. At one moment I thought she would break down; and then I confess that I felt, in your place, scarcely her own express command could have made up to me for being absent at such a time. The reading of the will was still more trying, if possible—at least I should have thought so. But she behaved like—herself—I can't say anything more. I thought you would like to have a separate account, as, no doubt, she will make as light of all she has to go through as possible. Only on this point you ought not altogether to take her own word. She has acknowledged that she will have a great deal to bear. She wants support, whatever she may say.'

A slight smile went over Cosmo's face as he put down this note. It was not a very comfortable smile. A man does not like even an imaginary tone of contempt in another man's voice. And Charley Ashley was his own retainer, his dog, so to speak. To be judged by him was a novel and not a pleasant sensation. A year ago Cosmo could have felt certain that Charley would find everything he did right; he would have believed in his friend's inscrutable motives, even if he could not understand them. But now there was a change. It was not only the hopeless rivalry which Charley himself felt to be hopeless, and which had never stood for a moment in Cosmo's way, but it was the instinct of true affection in the good fellow's heart which made a severe critic, a judge incorruptible, of Charley. Douglas did not think very much of Charley's opinion or approval; but to feel it withdrawn from him, to detect a doubt, and even suspicion in his faithful adherent's words, gave him a sting. Then he read the long letter in which Anne had poured forth all her heart; there were revelations in it also. It had been interrupted

by Rose's matter-of-fact questions. Darts of vulgar misapprehension, of commonplace incapacity to understand those fine motives of Cosmo's which to herself were so eloquent, had come across the current of her words. Anne had not been aware of the risings and fallings of sentiment with which she wrote. She had known that by turns her heart in her bosom felt, as she had herself described it, 'like lead.' She had been aware that now and then there had seemed no sort of comfort nor lightening of the sky wherever she looked, even when she looked to him, and endeavoured to think of that 'falling back upon' him to support her, which had seemed the happiest image of their mutual relations a few days ago. But she had not been aware of the breaks in her letter, following these fluctuations of sentiment, of how she had flagged and shown her discouragement, and sometimes permitted to be audible a breathing, not of complaint, not of reproach, but of something which was neither, yet included both—a sort of sigh of loneliness.

'My heart almost failed me when all was over,'

she wrote ; ‘ I think I must have shown it in my looks, for our cousin, Heathcote Mountford, held out his arm to me. It was not his arm I wanted, Cosmo, you know. Oh, how strange and how sad it is that just when we want support most, hard life has so altered everything that we cannot have it ! ’ And then, again, after giving him the fullest details of the will : ‘ I told you before that the thought of being set aside—of being second where I had always been first—was more hard to me than I could have believed possible ; and you, who are always ready to think the best of me, said that it was natural, that I could not have been expected to feel otherwise. I must tell you now, however, in my own defence, that I did not feel at all like this to-day ; I never imagined, though I have thought so often on the subject, that it would have been possible to set me aside so completely as has been done. You understand that I have nothing (except what came to me from old Uncle Ben), nothing—except indeed a sort of allowance like a schoolmistress for taking care of Rose, which will only last three years.

But, Cosmo, if you will believe me, I never thought of it; my heart did not sink in the least. I did not seem to care that it had all gone away from me, or that Rose had been set in my place, or that my father—(poor papa—how he must have felt it at the last!) should have been so unjust. They were all made of no account, as if they were the most trifling things in the world by—something else. I owe that to you too: and you must understand, dear Cosmo, you *must* understand that I feel you must have thought of this, and more or less done it on purpose, for my sake. I cared nothing, nothing, for all the loss and downfall, because there just gleamed upon me a possibility—no, not a possibility—a fancy, an imagination, of how different it would be if I had to face not the loss of fortune, but the loss of love, and companionship, and support. I cried out to myself, What would it all matter in comparison with that? Thank God that it is money that has been taken from me, not *that*. Feeling myself just for that moment, and for good reason, alone, made me realise to the very bottom of my heart what it

would be to be really alone—to have no one to fall back upon, no Cosmo, no world of my own where I can enter in and be above all the world. So you see this little bitter has been sweet, it has been medicine for all my other weaknesses. Through this I rose altogether superior to everything that was sordid. I was astonished at myself. Making believe not to care and not caring are two different things, and this time I attained real indifference, thanks to you.'

This was the passage that affected him most; there were others in which there were slighter references of the same kind, showing that Anne had already tasted the forlorn consciousness of what it was to be alone. It was not a complaint, as will be seen; it was indeed quite the opposite of a complaint; but it gave Cosmo a chill of alarm, a sensation which it would be very difficult to describe. Nor was it a threat on Anne's part—yet he was alarmed; he grew pale and chilly in spite of himself. When he read Anne's letter he took up Charley's again, and ran over that. If he did not want to

marry on nothing, and have a family to provide for before he had enough for himself, still less did he wish anyone to regard him as the hero of a broken engagement, a domestic traitor. He was not bad nor treacherous, nor had he any pleasure in the possibility of breaking a heart. What he wanted was, first, to find in the woman he loved 'a lady richly left' like Portia, bringing with her all the natural provisions for a beautiful home which she would grace and give charm to; second, if the first should not prove possible, patience to wait, and make no fuss, and see what would turn up. But to be supposed to have behaved badly to a lady, to be set down as drawing back, or holding off, or any of the mild phrases which imply desertion, was terrible to him. This Cosmo could not bear. He did not want to lose or even to risk Anne. And to have her think badly of him, lose the respect, not to say the love, which she felt for him, was a danger that made the hair stand upright on his head. He did not wish even to lose Charley Ashley's regard, and become a mean and discredited person in the curate's eyes:

how much more in Anne's, whom he loved ! A panic took possession of Cosmo. A dishonourable lover, a betrayer, was as much an anachronism as a cruel father ; it was a thing out of date. Men of his stamp broke no vows. They might be disinclined to heroic measures generally, and above all to the uncomfortable heroism of dragging down a woman into poverty, taking advantage of her inexperience, and marrying in the face of every suggestion of prudence. But to desert her because she had lost her fortune, to cry off as soon as it became evident that she was no longer a good match—this, whatever the vulgar imagination may think, is what a young man on his promotion, like Cosmo Douglas, could not venture to do. He was horrified by the very notion. In all questions of marriage there is of course a possibility that it may all come to nothing, that 'circumstances may arise'—that incompatibilities may be discovered—even that a mutual sense of what is prudent may cause an absolute breach. Such things are to be heard of every day in society. But for a man, especially one who is a nobody, to 'behave

badly ' to a lady --that is what cannot be. If the mere suggestion of such a thing got out, it would be unendurable. And Cosmo knew that everybody was ready to report every rumour, to put on record every incident of such a story. At the same time, the great crisis being over, there need be no longer, he said to himself, any idea of compromising Anne. Perhaps the ground on which he framed his new resolution was less solid than that on which he had framed the last. But, according to his new light, the emergency was pressing, and there was no time to lose.

That evening accordingly, the linen which had been put back into his drawers was replaced in the bag, and the contents of his purse reinvestigated. He sent a telegram to Charley Ashley, which filled that good fellow with excitement, compunction, and perhaps a touch of disappointment, and left London by the night train. It brought him to the Rectory uncomfortably early; but still there was no other so convenient which entailed so little loss of time, and Cosmo felt the advantage of making it apparent that

he had come hurriedly and had little time to spare. He arrived while it was still dark on the wintry, foggy, chill morning. Could any man do more to show the fervent reality of his passion? He had stayed away as long as Anne was filling a kind of official position, so long as she was the object of general observation. Now, when she had no longer any sort of artificial claim upon her, or necessity for exerting herself, here he was at her command.

CHAPTER XXIII.

HEATHCOTE'S PROPOSAL.

It was a new world upon which Anne rose that day. The excitement was over, the gloomy details of business drawing to completion, and the new circumstances of the family life remained to be settled by the family themselves. It was still early when Anne came downstairs, and took her way to the library in which Mr. Loseby was sitting. He was at her father's table, almost in the same spot where Mr. Mountford, for as long as she could remember, had done his business, or made believe to do it. This startled her a little ; but it was time to resist these overwhelming associations, and address herself, she felt, to the business in hand. She came up to him quickly, giving herself no time to think. 'Mr. Loseby,

you must instruct me what are my duties,' she said.

Heathcote Mountford was at the other end of the room, idly looking through the books, and she had not seen him, but he was unconscious of this. By degrees he had come to know all about Anne, to feel a difference in the atmosphere when she came in, to see her whenever she appeared as if with eyes in the back of his head.

'Your duties, my dear child?' Mr. Loseby said, pushing up his spectacles on his forehead. 'Sit down there in front of me and let us talk. It does one good to look at you, Anne.'

'You were always very kind,' she said gratefully. 'But you must not spoil me now, for if you do I shall cry, and all my morning's work will come to an end. Mamma is coming downstairs to-day, and all is to be as—it can never be again,' said Anne, with an abrupt interruption of herself. 'But in the meantime it is very needful for me to know what I am to do. I want you to tell me while we are safe—while we are alone.'

‘My dear Anne,’ said the old lawyer, ‘my dear Anne!’ and the tears came to his eyes. ‘I wish I were everything that I can’t be—a fairy prince or a romantic hero—for your sake.’

‘I like you a great deal better as Mr. Loseby than if you were a fairy prince.’

‘I dare say that is true; but in the one case I might have delivered you, and in the other I can’t. Do! I don’t know what you have got to do.’

‘Somebody must,’ said Anne. ‘Tell me, please. Am I the guardian, or what does it mean? In Trust! It might be a great deal, or it might not be much. I want to do my duty, Mr. Loseby.’

‘That I am sure you will do, whatever happens. You will have to administer the whole, and watch over the money, and look out for the investments. It is the most extraordinary office for you: but we will not say anything about that.’

‘No: but I do not think it is such an extraordinary office. If the money had been mine, I should have had it to do naturally, and of course I shall do it with all the more care when it is for Rose. The

pity is that I don't know anything about it,' said Anne, gravely. 'But I suppose there are books on the subject, books about money and how to manage it. You must tell me how to learn my new profession,' she added with a smile. 'It is a curious thing all at once to wake up and find that one has a trade.'

'I don't see how you can call it a trade.'

'Oh, yes, Mr. Loseby, and I am to have 500*l.* a-year of pay—I shall not be worth half so much. When I was young,' said Anne, with the serene consciousness of maturity, 'it was one of my fancies to learn something that I could live by. I am afraid I thought of quite little pettifogging businesses—little bits of art-work or such like. I shall be a kind of land-steward with a little of a stock-broker in me, now.'

'Yes, something of that sort,' he said, humouring her, looking at her with a smile.

'Curious,' said Anne, with a gleam of laughter getting into her eyes, 'I think I shall like it too; it ought to be amusing—it ought to have an interest—'

and you know everybody says that what we girls want is an interest in our lives.'

'You have never wanted an interest in your life.'

'No, I do not think I have; but you must not look so sorry—I am not sorry for myself. What does it matter after all?' said Anne, raising her head with that lofty visionary defiance of all evil. 'There are things which one could not consent to lose—which it really breaks one's heart to lose—which would need to be torn and wrenched out of one: you know, Mr. Loseby?—but not money; how different when it is only money! The mere idea that you might lose the one makes you feel what loss would be, makes you contemptuous of the other.'

'I know?—do you think I know?—Indeed, my dear, I cannot tell,' said Mr. Loseby, shaking his head. 'If I lost what I have, I should not find it at all easy to console myself. I don't think I should be contemptuous or indifferent if all my living were to go.'

'Ah!' she cried, with a sudden light of com-

punction and pity in her eyes, 'but that is because you—— Oh, forgive me!' with a sudden perception of what she was saying.

'That is because I have not much else to lose?' said the old lawyer. 'Don't be sorry for saying it; it is true. I lost all I had in that way, my dear, as you know, many many years ago. Life, to be sure, has changed very much since then, but I am not unhappy. I have learnt to be content; and it would make a great difference to me if I lost what I have to live upon. Anne, I have got something to tell you which I think will make you happier.'

She looked at him eagerly with her lips apart, her eyes full of beseeching earnestness. 'It is about your father, Anne.'

Her countenance changed a little, but kept its eagerness. She had not expected anything to make her happier from that quarter; but she was almost more anxious than before to hear what it was.

'Your cousin has been telling me—you heard his proposal about the entail, which, alas! no time was left us to discuss?—he thinks from what your father

said to him,' said the lawyer, leaning across the table and putting his hand upon hers, 'that he meant to have arranged this according to Heathcote Mountford's wishes, and to have settled Mount on you.'

Anne could not speak at first. The tears that had been gathering in her eyes overflowed and fell in a warm shower upon Mr. Loseby's hand. 'My cousin Heathcote told you this?' she said, half sobbing, after a pause.

'Yes, Anne. I thought it would please you to know.'

'Please me!' she made a little pause again, sobbing and smiling. Then she clasped his old hand in both hers with sudden enthusiasm. 'It makes me perfectly happy!' she cried: 'nothing, nothing troubles me any more.'

Then, with natural feminine instinct, she wanted to hear every detail from him of the distinct conversation which she immediately concluded to have taken place between her father and her cousin. Though no one was more ready to jump to conclu-

sions, Anne became as matter-of-fact as Rose herself in her eagerness to know everything that had taken place. The old lawyer did not feel himself able to cope with her questions. 'I was not present,' he said; 'but your cousin himself is here, and he will tell you. Yes, there he is, looking at the books. I am going to fetch some papers I left in my bedroom. Mr. Heathcote, will you come and explain it all while I am away?'

He chuckled to himself with satisfaction as he left them together: but after all what was the use? 'Good Lord,' he cried to himself, 'why *couldn't* the fellow have come a year ago?' To see how Providence seems to take a pleasure in making the best of plans impracticable! It was inconceivable that nobody had sense enough ever to have thought of that plan before.

: But when Anne found herself face to face with Heathcote Mountford, and suddenly discovered that he had been present all the time, she did not feel the same disposition to pursue her inquiries. She had even a feeling that she had committed herself, though

she could scarcely tell how. She rose up from her seat with a faint smile, mastering her tears and excitement. 'Thank you for telling Mr. Loseby what has made me so happy,' she said. Then added, 'Indeed, it was more for others than myself. I knew all the time my father had not meant to wrong anyone; no, no, he never was unjust in his life; but others, strangers, like yourself, how were you to know?'

'I am sure this was what he meant,' Heathcote said, putting much more fervour into the asseveration than it would have required had it been as certain as he said. Anne was chilled a little by his very warmth, but she would not admit this.

'I was very certain of it always,' she said, 'though I did not know how he meant it to be. But now, Mr. Heathcote, thank you, thank you with all my heart! you have set that matter to rest.'

Was it really good for her to think that the matter was set at rest, that there never had been any doubt about it, that nothing but honour, and justice, and love towards her had ever been in her father's

thoughts? No doubt she would set up some theory of the same kind to explain, with the same certainty, the sluggishness of the other, of the fellow who, having a right to support her, had left her to stand alone in her trouble. This brought a warm glow of anger into Heathcote's veins; but he could only show it by a little impatience expressed with a laugh over a small grievance of his own.

'You said Cousin Heathcote just now. I think after all we have seen and felt together, that a title at least as familiar as that might be mine.'

'Surely,' she said, with so friendly a smile, that Heathcote felt himself ridiculously touched. Why this girl should with a smile make him feel disposed to weep, if that were possible to a man of his age, he could not tell. It was too absurd, but perhaps it was because of the strange position in which she herself stood, and the way in which she occupied it, declaring herself happy in her loss, yet speaking with such bated breath of the other loss which she had discovered to be possible, and which, in being possible, had taken all feeling about her fortune away from

her. A woman, standing thus alone among all the storms, so young, so brave, so magnanimous, touches a man's heart in spite of himself. This was how he explained it. As he looked at her, he found it difficult to keep the moisture out of his eyes.

‘I want to speak to you about business,’ he said. ‘Mr. Loseby is not the only instructor in that art. Will you tell me—don't think I am impertinent: where you intend—where you wish—to live?’

A flush came upon Anne's face. She thought he wanted possession of his own house, which was so natural. ‘We will not stay to trouble you!’ she cried. Then, overcoming the little impulse of pride, ‘Forgive me, Cousin Heathcote, that was not what you meant, I know. We have not talked of it, we have had no consultation as yet. Except Mount, where I have always lived, one place is the same as another to me.’

But while she said this there was something in Anne's eyes that contradicted her, and he thought that he could read what it meant. He felt that he knew better than she knew herself, and this gave

him zeal in his proposal; though what he wanted was not to further but to hinder the wish which he divined in her heart.

‘If this is the case, why not stay at Mount?’ Heathcote said. ‘Listen to me; it is of no use to me; I am not rich enough to keep it up. This is why I wanted to get rid of it. You love the place and everything about it—whereas it is nothing to me.’

‘Is it so?’ said Anne, with a voice of regret. ‘Mount!—nothing to you?’

‘It was nothing to me, at least till the other day; and to you it is so much. All your associations are connected with it; you were born here, and have all your friends here,’ said Heathcote, unconsciously enlarging upon the claims of the place, as if to press them upon an unwilling hearer. Why should he think she was unwilling to acknowledge her love for her home? And yet Anne felt in her heart that there was divination in what he said.

‘But, Cousin Heathcote, it is yours, not ours. It was our home, but it is no longer so. Don’t you

think it would be more hard to have no right to it, and yet stay, than to give it up and go? The happiness of Mount is over,' she said softly. 'It is no longer to us the one place in the world.'

'That is a hard thing to say to me, Anne.'

'Is it? why so? When you are settled in it, years after this, if you will ask me, I will come to see you, and be quite happy,' said Anne with a smile; 'indeed I shall; it is not a mean dislike to see you here. That is the course of nature. We always knew it was to be yours. There is no feeling of wrong, no pain at all in it; but it is no longer *ours*. Don't you see the difference? I am sure you see it,' she said.

'But if your father had carried out his intention——'

'Do you know,' said Anne, looking at him with a half wistful, half smiling look, 'on second thoughts it would perhaps be better not to say anything to mamma or Rose about my father's intention? They might think it strange. They might say that was no punishment at all. I am very glad to know it for

my own comfort, and that you should understand how really just he was ; but they might not see it in the same light.'

'And it has nothing to do with the question,' said Heathcote, almost roughly ; 'the opportunity for such an arrangement is over. Whether he intended or whether he did not intend it—I cannot give you Mount.'

'No, no ; certainly you cannot give it to me——'

'At least,' he cried, carried beyond himself by the excitement of the moment. 'There was only one way in which I could have given it to you : and that, without ever leaving me the chance, without thinking of any claim I had, you have put out of my power—you have made impossible, Anne!'

She looked at him, her eyes opened wider, her lips dropping apart, with a sort of consternation : then a tinge of warmer colour gradually rose over her face. The almost fierceness of his tone, the aggrieved voice and expression had something half ludicrous in it ; but in her surprise this was not visible to Anne. And he saw that he had startled her, which is always satisfactory. She owed him reparation for this,

though it was an unintentional wrong. He ended with a severity of indignation which overwhelmed her.

‘It does not seem to me that I was ever thought of, that anyone took me into consideration. I was never allowed to have a chance. Before I came here, my place, the place I might have claimed, was appropriated. And now I must keep Mount though I do not want it, and you must leave it though you do want it, when our interests might have been one. But no, no, I am mistaken. You do not want it now, though it is your home. You think you will prefer London, because London is——’

‘Mr. Heathcote Mountford, I think you forget what you are saying——’

‘Don’t call me that at least,’ he cried; ‘don’t thrust me away again as a stranger. Yes, I am absurd; I have no right to claim any place or any rights. If I had not been a fool, I should have come here a year, five years ago, as old Loseby says.’

‘What is that about old Loseby?’ said the lawyer, coming into the room. He was carrying a

portfolio in his hands, which, let us hope, he had honestly gone to look for when he left them. Anyhow he carried it ostentatiously as if this had been his natural object in his absence. But the others were too much excited to notice his portfolio or his severely business air. At least Heathcote was excited, who felt that he had evidently made a fool of himself, and had given vent to a bit of ridiculous emotion, quite uncalled for, without any object, and originating he could not tell how. What was the meaning of it, he would have asked himself, but that the fumes of his own words had got into his head. He turned away, quite beyond his own control, when the lawyer appeared, his heart beating, his blood coursing through his veins. How had all this tempest got up in an instant? Did it come from nothing, and mean nothing? or had it been there within him, lying quiescent all this time. He could not answer the question, nor, indeed, for that matter, did he ask it, being much too fully occupied for the moment with the commotion which had thus

suddenly got up like the boiling of a volcano within him, without any will of his own.

And Anne was too much bewildered, too much astonished to say anything. She could not believe her own ears. It seemed to her that her senses must be playing her false, that she could not be seeing aright or hearing aright—or else what did it mean? Mr. Loseby glided in between them with his portfolio, feeling sure they would remark his little artifice and understand his stratagem; but he had succeeded in that stratagem so much better than he thought, that they paid no attention to him at all.

‘What are you saying about old Loseby?’ he asked. ‘It is not civil in the first place, Mr. Heathcote, to call your family man of business old. It is a contumelious expression. I am not sure that it is not actionable. That reminds me that I have never had anything to do with your branch of the family—which, no doubt, is the reason why you take this liberty. I am on the other side——’

‘Do me this service, then, at once,’ said Heathcote, coming back from that agitated little walk

with which a man who has been committing himself and showing uncalled-for emotion so often relieves his feelings. 'Persuade my cousins to gratify me by staying at Mount. I have clearly told you I should not know what to do with it. If they will stay nothing need be changed.'

'It is a very good idea,' said Mr. Loseby. 'I think an excellent idea. They will pay you a rent for it which will be reasonable, which will not be exorbitant.'

'They shall do nothing of the sort,' cried Heathcote: 'rent—between me and——'

'Yes, between you and Mrs. Mountford, the most reasonable proposal in the world. It is really a thing to be taken into your full consideration, Anne. Of course you must live somewhere. And there is no place you would like so well.'

Here a guilty flush came upon Anne's face. She stole a furtive glance at Heathcote to see if he were observing her. She did not wish to give him the opportunity of saying 'I told you so,' or convicting her out of her own mouth.

‘I think mamma and Rose have some idea—that is, there was some talk—Rose has always wanted masters whom we can’t get here. There was an idea of settling in London—for a time——’

He did not turn round, which was merciful. If he had divined her, if he now understood her, he gave no sign at least. This was generous, and touched Anne’s heart.

‘In London! Now, what on earth would you do in London, country birds like Rose and you? I don’t say for a little time in the season, to see the pictures, and hear some music, and that sort of thing; but settling in London, what would you do that for? You would not like it; I feel sure you would not like it. You never could like it, if you tried.’

To this Anne was dumb, making no response. She stood with her eyes cast down, her face flushed and abashed, her two hands clasped together, as much like a confused and naughty child as it was possible for Anne to be. She gave once more an instantaneous, furtive glance from under her downcast

eyelids at Heathcote. Would he rejoice over her to see his guess, his impertinent guess, proved true? But Heathcote was taking another agitated turn about the room, to blow off his own excitement, and was not for the moment observant of hers.

After this Mr. Loseby began to impart to Anne real information about the duties which would be required of her, to which she gave what attention she could. But this was not so much as could have been desired. Her mind was running over with various thoughts of her own, impulses which had come to her from another mind, and new aspects of old questions. She left the library as soon as she could, in order to get back to the shelter of her own room and there think them out. Had Heathcote known how little attention she gave to his own strange, unintentional self-betrayal—if it was indeed a self-betrayal, and not a mere involuntary outbreak of the moment, some nervous impulse or other, incomprehensible to the speaker as to the hearer—he would have been sadly humbled. But, as a matter of fact, Anne scarcely thought of his words

at all. He had made some mistake, she felt sure. She had not heard him right, or else she had missed the real meaning of what he said, for that surface meaning was of course impossible. But she did think about the other matter. He had divined her almost more clearly than she had understood herself. When she had decided that to go to London would be the best thing the family could do, she had carefully directed her mind to other motives; to the facilities of getting masters for Rose, and books, and everything that was interesting; to the comfort and ease of life in a place where everything could be provided so easily, where there would be no great household to keep up. She had thought of the cheerfulness of a bright little house near the parks, and all the things there would be to see—the interests on all sides, the means of occupying themselves. But she had not thought—had she thought?—that Cosmo would be at hand, that he would be within reach, that he might be the companion of many expeditions, the sharer of many

occupations. Had she secretly been thinking of this all the time? had this been her motive and not the other? Heathcote Mountford had seen through her and had divined it, though she had not known it herself. She paused now to ask herself with no small emotion, if this were true; and she could not say that it was not true or half true. If it were so, was it not unmaidenly, unwomanly, wrong to go after him, since he did not come to her? She had made up her mind to it without being conscious of that motive: but now the veil was torn from her eyes, and she was aware of the weakness in her own heart. Ought she to go, being now sure that to be near Cosmo was one of her chief objects; or would it be better to remain at Mount as Heathcote's tenant? Anne's heart sank down, down to the lowest depth; but she was a girl who could defy her heart and all her inclinations when need was. She threw herself back as a last resource upon the others who had to be consulted. Though she knew she could turn them as she pleased, yet she proposed to herself

to make an oracle of them. According to their response, who knew nothing about it, who would speak according to the chance impression of the moment, so should the decision be.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A VISITOR.

THAT evening all things had recommenced to be at Mount as——‘they could never be again,’ as Anne said : that is, the habits of the first week of mourning had been laid aside, the ladies had come downstairs, and appeared at table, and everything returned to its use and wont. Mr. Mountford’s place was left vacant at the table. Heathcote would not take it, though he had been assured, with tears, that the family would wish it so to be, and that no one would feel wounded by his assumption of his rights. ‘I will sit where I have always sat if you will let me,’ he said, putting himself at Mrs. Mountford’s right hand. Thus he sat between her and Rose, who was pleased by what she thought the preference he showed her. Rose dearly liked to be preferred—

and, besides, Heathcote was not to be despised in any way. Grave thoughts of uniting the property had already entered her little head. He was not young, indeed he was distinctly old in Rose's juvenile eyes, but she said to herself that when a man has so much in his favour a trifling matter like age does not count. She was very serious, what her mother called practical, in her ways of thinking: and the importance of uniting the property affected Rose. Therefore she was glad that he seemed to like her best, to choose her side of the table. Anne sat opposite, contemplating them all serenely, meeting Heathcote's eyes without any shyness, which was more than he could boast in respect to her. He scarcely addressed her at all during the time of dinner, and he never, she perceived, broached to her stepmother or sister the question which he had discussed with her with so much vehemence. At dinner Anne felt herself at leisure—she was able to look at him and observe him, as she had never done before. He had a very handsome face, more like the ideal hero of a book than anything that is

usually met with in the world. His eyes were large and dark; his nose straight; his hair dark, too, and framing his face as in a picture. 'I do not like handsome men,' Anne said to herself. She smiled when the thought had formed in her mind, smiled at herself. Cosmo was not handsome; he was of no particular colour, and had no very striking features. People said of him that he was gentlemanlike. It was the only thing to say. But here was a face which really was beautiful. Beauty! in a man she said to herself! and felt that she disliked it. But she could not but look at him across the table. She could not lift her eyes without seeing him. His face was the kind of face that it was natural to suppose should express fine sentiments, high-flown, Anne said to herself, she whom everybody else called high-flown. But he listened with a smile to Rose who was not of that constitution of mind.

After dinner, when the ladies were alone in the drawing-room, Anne made their cousin's proposal known to them: that they should continue to live at Mount, paying him rent according to Mr. Loseby's

suggestion. She did not herself wish to accept this proposal—but a kind of opposition was roused in her by the blank manner in which it was listened to. She had been struggling against a guilty sense of her own private inclination to go to London, to be in the same place with her lover—but she did not see why *they* should wish the same thing. There seemed to Anne to be a certain impertinence in any inclination of theirs which should turn the same way. What inducement had they to care for London, or any change of residence? Though they were virtually backing her up, yet she was angry with them for it. ‘I thought you would be sure to wish to stay,’ she said.

‘You see, Anne,’ said Mrs. Mountford, with some hesitation, ‘it is not now as it was before; when we were all happy together, home was home. But now, after all we have gone through—and things would not be the same as before—your sister wants a change—and so do you——’

‘Do not think of me,’ said Anne, hastily.

‘But it is my duty to think of you, too. Rose

has always been delicate, and the winters at Mount are trying, and this year, of course, you would have no variety, no society. I am sure it is very kind of Heathcote: but if we could get a comfortable little house in town—a change,’ said Mrs. Mountford, growing bolder, ‘would do us all good.’

‘Oh, don’t let us stay at Mount,’ cried Rose. ‘In the wet, cold winter days it is terrible. I have never liked Mount in winter. Do let us get away now that we can get away. I have never seen anything. Let us go to town till the spring, and then let us go abroad.’

‘That is what I should like,’ said Mrs. Mountford, meekly. ‘Change of air and scene is always recommended. You are very strong, Anne, you don’t feel it so much—you could go on for ever; but people that are more delicately organised, people who *feel* things more, can’t just settle down after trouble like ours. We ought to move about a little and have thorough change of scene.’

Anne was amazed at herself for the annoyance, the resentment, the resistance to which she felt

herself moved. It was simple perversity, she felt, for in her heart she wanted to move, perhaps more than they did—and she had a reason for her wish—but they had none. It was mere wanton desire for change on their part. She was angry, though she saw how foolish it was to be angry. ‘It was extremely kind of Heathcote to make such a proposal,’ she said.

‘I don’t say it was not kind, Anne—but he feels that he cannot keep it up. He does not like the idea of leaving the place all dismantled and uninhabited. You may tell him I will leave the furniture; I should not think of taking it away, just at present. I think we should look about us,’ said Mrs. Mountford, ‘before we settle anywhere; and select a really good place—which Mount would never be,’ she added, with a little shaking out of her crape, ‘for us, in our changed circumstances. It may be very kind of Heathcote—but I don’t see that we can do it. It would be too much to expect.’

And Anne was silenced, not knowing what pleas to bring forward for the defeat of the cause which

was her own cause; but she was angry that they should presume to think so *too*. What was town to them? They had no one in it to make that great wilderness feel like home. They had no inducement that she knew of. She felt reluctant to be happy by such unreasonable means.

Keziah, the little maid to whom Anne had, during the interval since she was last mentioned, imparted a great deal of very energetic advice as to the duty of holding fast to her lover, and taking no thought of interest, had red eyes that night when she came to put her mistress's things away. Anne was very independent. She did not require much actual service. It was Rose who benefited by Keziah's services in this respect. But when she was dismissed by Rose she came into the room where Anne sat writing, and instead of doing her work as usual with noiseless speed, and taking herself away, she hovered about for a long time, poking the fire, arranging things that had no particular need of arranging, and crossing and re-crossing Anne's point

of view. She had red eyes, but there was in her little person an air of decision that was but seldom apparent there. This Anne perceived, when, attracted at length by these manœuvres, she put away her writing and looked up. 'Keziah,' she said, 'how are things going? I can't help thinking you have something to say to me to-night.'

'Yes, Miss Anne,' said the girl, very composedly; 'I have got something to say—I wanted you to know, as you've always been so kind and taken an interest—people has the same sort of feelings, I suppose, whether they're quality or whether they're common folks—'

'That is very true, Keziah. I suspect we are all of the same flesh and blood.'

'Don't you laugh at me, Miss Anne. Miss Anne, I would like to tell you as I've made up my mind to-night.'

'I hope you have made a right decision, Keziah,' said Anne, with some anxiety, feeling suspicious of the red eyes.

'Oh, I'm not afraid of its being *right*, Miss

Anne. If it wasn't right,' said the little girl, with a wan smile, 'I don't think as it would be as hard. I'd have settled sooner if it hadn't been for thinking what Jim would say,' she added, a tear or two coming to dilate her eyes; 'it wasn't for myself. If you do your duty, Miss Anne, you can't do no more.'

'Then Keziah, you have been talked over,' said Anne, with some indignation, rising up from her desk. 'Worth has been worrying you, and you have not been able to resist her. Why did you not tell her, as I told you, to come and have it out with me?'

'I don't know what good that would have done, Miss Anne. It was me that had to settle after all.'

'Of course it was you that had to settle. Had it been anyone else I should not have lost all this time, I should have interfered at once. Keziah, do you know what you are doing? A young girl like you, just my age—(but I am not so young, I have had so much to think of, and to go through), to sell herself to an old man.'

'Miss Anne, I'm not selling myself' said Keziah,

with a little flush of resentment. 'He hasn't given me anything, not so much as a ring—I wouldn't have it of him—I wouldn't take not a silver thimble, though he's always teasing—for fear you should say—— Whatever anyone may think, they can't say as I've sold myself,' said Keziah proudly. 'I wouldn't take a thing from him, not if it was to save his life.'

'This is mere playing upon words, Keziah,' said Anne, towering over the victim in virtuous indignation. 'Old Saymore is well off and poor Jim has nothing. What do you call that but selling yourself? But it is not your doing! it is Worth's doing. Why doesn't he marry *her*? It would be a great deal more suitable than marrying you.'

'He don't seem to see that, Miss Anne,' said Keziah with a demure half curtsy: a certain comic sense of the absurdity of marrying the aunt when the niece was by, crept into the profound seriousness of her looks. That anybody should suppose old Saymore would marry Worth gave the girl a melancholy amusement in spite of herself

‘She would be far more suitable,’ cried Anne in her impetuous way. ‘I think I’ll speak to them both and set it before them. It would be a thousand times more suitable. But old Saymore is too old even for Worth: what would he be for you?’

Keziah looked at her young mistress with eyes full of very mingled feelings. The possibility of being delivered by the simple expedient of a sudden match got up by the tormentors themselves gave her a half-frightened visionary hope, but it was mixed with a half-offended sentiment of proprietorship which she could scarcely acknowledge: old Saymore belonged to her. She would have liked to get free from the disagreeable necessity of marrying him, but she did not quite like the idea of seeing him married off to somebody else under her very eyes.

‘It’s more than just that, Miss Anne,’ she said, shaking her head. ‘All of us in the house are thinking of what is likely to happen, and Mr. Saymore, he says he will never take another place after having been so long here. And he has a good bit of money laid by, Miss Anne,’ said Keziah, not without pride.

‘And Mr. Goodman, of the “Black Bull” at Huns-
ton, he’s dead. That’s where we’re thinking of
settling. I know how to keep the books and make
up the bills, and mother she would be in the kitchen,
and such a fine opening for the boys. I don’t know
what I shouldn’t deserve if I were to set up myself
against all that. And it isn’t myself neither,’ said
Keziah. ‘I should be ashamed to make a fuss for
me. I have always told you that, Miss Anne. I
hope I’m not one as would go against my duty. It’s
Jim I’ve always thought upon. Men folks are more
wilful than women. They are more used to get
their own way. If he was to go to the bad, Miss
Anne, and me the cause of it——’

Here Keziah broke down, and wept without any
further attempt to restrain her tears.

‘I don’t understand you,’ cried Anne impetuously.
‘You pretend to be sorry for him, and this is how
you treat him. But leave Jim to take care of him-
self, Keziah. Let us think of you. This is what I
call going to the bad. Poor Jim might take to
drinking, perhaps, and ruin himself—but I don’t

think that is so much going to the bad as to love one man and marry another. That is the worst of sin,' said the girl, with cheeks and eyes both flaming. 'It is treachery, it is falsehood, it is dishonour, to you and to every one concerned.'

Poor little Keziah quailed before this outburst. She shrank back with a look of pain as if she feared her mistress's wrath would take some tangible form. She cried bitterly, sobbing aloud, 'You've got no call to be angry, Miss Anne. You didn't ought to be angry, Miss Anne. I'm a-going to do my duty; it's nothing but my duty as I'm going to do!'

Anne felt, when the interview was over, that she had in all probability done more harm than good. She had frightened Keziah, and made her cling all the more to the comfort which sprang from a settled resolution, and she had even stimulated that resolve by the prick of opposition which moves the meekest of natures. She had made Keziah feel herself wronged, her sacrifice unappreciated, her duty misconceived, and the girl had fallen back with all the more confidence upon the approval of her (as Anne

thought) worldly-minded aunt, and the consolation of the old bridegroom, who, though he was old, was a great man in the servants' hall—great as the butler and head of the establishment downstairs, and still more great as the prospective landlord of the 'Black Bull' at Hunston. To be the future mistress of such a place was a glory enough to turn a girl's head. Keziah went away crying, and feeling that she had not deserved the cruel 'scolding' administered by Miss Anne. She going to the bad! when she was doing her duty in the highest and most superlative way, and had hanging over her head, almost touching it, the crown of that landlady's cap, with the most becoming ribbons, which ranks like the strawberry leaves of another elevation in the housekeeper's room and the servants' hall.

It was the morning after this that Cosmo arrived. Anne was going downstairs to a morning's work with Mr. Loseby, thoughtful and serious as she always was now; but by this time all the strangeness of her position was over; she had got used to it and even reconciled to it. She had work to do, and a position

in the world which was all that one wanted for happiness. Indeed, she was better off, she said to herself, than if she had been in her natural position. In that case, in all probability, she would have had someone else to do for her what she was now to do for Rose, and her occupation would have been gone. She felt that she had passed into the second chapter of life—as if she had married, she said to herself with a passing blush—though so different. She had real work to do in the world, not make-believe, but actual—not a thing she could throw aside if she pleased, or was doing only for amusement. Perhaps it requires a whole life of leisure, and ideas shaped by that exemption from care which so often strikes the generous mind as ignoble, which made her appreciate so highly this fine burden of real unmistakable work, not done to occupy her time merely, but because it had to be done. She prepared herself for it, not only without pain but with actual pleasure. But on her way down to the library, where Mr. Loseby was waiting her, Anne chanced to cast her eyes out from the end

of the corridor across the park. It was the same window to which she had rushed to listen to the cry the night her father died. It had been night then, with a white haze of misty moonlight and great shadows of blackness. But now it was morning, and the red sunshine lighted up the hoar frost on the grass, already pursuing it into corners, melting away the congealed dew upon the herbs and trees. She stood for a moment's meditation, still gazing out without any object, scarcely knowing why. To a thoughtful and musing mind there is a great attraction at a window, which is a kind of opening in the house and in one's being, full of long wistful vistas of inspection into the unseen. But Anne had not been there many minutes before a cry broke from her lips, and her whole aspect changed. Charley Ashley was coming along the road which crossed the park—but not alone. A thrill ran through her from her head to her feet. In a moment her mind went over the whole of the past fortnight's story. Her chill and dumbness of disappointment, which she would not express even to herself, when he did not come ;

her acquiescence of reason (but still with a chill of the heart) in his explanations ; the subdued sense of restraint, and enforced obedience to other rules, not first or only to those of the heart, and the effort with which she had bowed herself ; her solitude, her longing for support, her uneasiness every way under the yoke which he had thought it necessary to impose upon himself and her ; all this seemed to pass before her view in a moment. She had acquiesced ; she had even reasoned herself into satisfaction ; but oh ! the glorious gleam of approval with which Anne saw all that she had consented to beforehand in the light of the fact that now he was here ; now he was coming, all reason for his staying away being over—not hurriedly, as if wishing to chase the recollection of her father from her mind, or to grudge him that last pre-eminence in the thoughts of those belonging to him, which is the privilege of every man who dies. Cosmo had fulfilled every reverent duty towards him who was his enemy. He had done what it was most difficult to do. He had kept away till all the rites were accomplished ; and now he was coming ! All

was over, not one other observance of affection possible the very widow coming out again, thinking (a little) of the set of her cap and planning to go abroad in spring. And now there was no longer any reason why the lover should stay away. If there is one feeling in the world which is divine, it is the sense of full approval of those whom one loves most. To be able with one's whole heart to consent and know that all they have done is well, to approve them not with blindness (though that is the silliest fable) of love, or its short-sightedness, but, on the contrary, with all its enlightenment in the eyes that cannot be content with less than excellence : to look on and see everything and approve—this, and not any personal transport or enjoyment, is heaven. Anne, standing by the window seeing the two figures come in sight, in a moment felt the gates of Paradise open before her, and was swept within them by a silent flood of joy. She approved, making no exception, reserving nothing. As she walked downstairs, her feet did not seem to touch the ground. What a poor, small, ignoble little being she had been not to read him all

the time ; but now that the illumination had come, and she saw his conduct from first to last, Anne saw, or thought she saw, that everything was right, everything noble. She approved, and was happy. She forgot Mr. Loseby and the morning's business, and walked towards the hall with a serene splendour about her, a glory as of the moon and the stars, all beautiful in reflected light.

There was nobody in the hall, and the kind curate when he came in did nothing but pass through it. 'I suppose I shall find them in the drawing-room?' he said, waving his hand and walking past. Anne accepted the passing greeting gladly. What did she want with Charley? He went through the hall while the other came to her side.

'You wanted me, Anne?'

'Wanted you—oh, how I have wanted you!—there has been so much to do ; but I approve, Cosmo—I approve everything you have done. I feel it right that I should have stood alone till now. You help me more in doing my duty, than if you had

done all for me. You were right all along, all through——’

‘Thank you, my dearest,’ he said. ‘But, Anne, I see in what you say that there have been moments in which you have not approved. This was what I feared—and it would have been so much easier to do what was pleasant.’

‘No—I do not think there were moments—at least not anything more. Cosmo, what do you think of me now, a woman without a penny? I wonder if you approve of me as I approve of you.’

‘I think I do more, dear; I admire, though I don’t think I could have been so brave myself. If you had not been just the girl you are, I fear I should have said, Throw me over and let us wait.’

‘You did say it,’ she said in a lower tone; ‘that is the only thing of all that I do not like in you.’

‘To think you should have undergone such a loss for me!—and I am not worth it—it humbles me, Anne. I could not believe it was possible. Up to the last minute I felt it could not be.’

‘I knew it would be,’ she said softly: was not

there something else that Cosmo had to say? She waited for half a minute with a certain wistfulness in her eyes. The glory of her approval faded a little—a very little. To be perfect he had to say something more. ‘If thou wouldst be perfect!’ Was not even the Saviour himself disappointed (though he knew what was in man) when the young ruler whom he loved at first sight did not rise to that height which was opened to him? Anne could not say the same words, but she felt them in her heart. Oh, Cosmo, if thou wouldst be perfect! but he did not see it, or he did not do it at least.

‘I cannot understand it yet,’ he went on. ‘Such injustice, such cruelty—do I pain you, my darling? I cannot help it. If it had been only the postponement of all our hopes, that would have been bad enough: but to take your rights from you arbitrarily, absolutely, without giving you any choice——’

‘I would so much rather you did not speak of it, Cosmo. It cannot be mended. I have got to accept it and do the best I can,’ she said.

‘You take it like an angel, Anne. I knew you

would do that : but I am not an angel : and to have all our happiness thrust into the distance, indefinitely, making the heart sick—you must not expect me to take it so easily. If I had been rich indeed—how one longs to be rich sometimes !’ he said, almost hurting her with the close clasp of his arm. Every word he said was true ; he loved her even with passion, as he understood passion. And if he had been rich, Cosmo would have satisfied that judgment of hers, which once more, in spite of her, was up in the tribunal, watchful, anxious, not able to blind its eyes.

‘ I do not long to be rich,’ she said ; ‘ little will content me.’

‘ My dearest !’ he said with tender enthusiasm, with so much love in his looks and tone, so much admiration, almost adoration, that Anne’s heart was put to silence in spite of herself. How is a woman, a girl, to remain uninfluenced by all these signs of attachment ? She could not repulse them ; she could not say, All this is nothing. If thou would’st be perfect ! Her consciousness of something wanting was not put away, but it was subdued, put down,

forced into the shade. How could she insist upon what was, indeed, the final test of his attachment? how could she even indicate it? Anne had, in her mind, no project of marriage which would involve the laying aside of all the active practical duties which her father had left as his only legacy to her; but that her lover should take it for granted that her loss postponed all their hopes, was not a thing which, in itself, was pleasant to think of. She could not banish this consciousness from her mind. But in those early moments when Cosmo was so tender, when his love was so evident, how could she hold back and doubt him? It was easier by far to put a stop upon herself, and to silence her indefinite, indefinable dissatisfaction. For in every respect but this Cosmo was perfect. When he presented himself before Mrs. Mountford his demeanour was everything that could be desired. He threw himself into all their arrangements, and asked about their plans with the gentle insistence of one who had a right to know. He promised, nay offered, at once to begin the search for a house, which was the first thing to be done.

‘It will be the pleasantest of duties,’ he said. ‘What a difference to my life! It will be like living by the gates of heaven, to live in the same place with you, to know I may come and see you : or even come and look at the house you are in.’ ‘Certainly,’ Mrs. Mountford said afterwards, ‘Mr. Douglas was very nice. I wonder why dear papa was so prejudiced against him, for, indeed, nothing could be nicer than the way he talked ; and he will be a great help to us in finding a house.’ He stayed the whole day, and his presence made everything go smoothly. The dinner-table was absolutely cheerful with the aid of his talk, his town news, his latest information about everything. He pleased everybody, even down to old Saymore, who had not admired him before. Cosmo had to leave next day, having, as he told them, while the courts were sitting, no possibility of a holiday ; but he went charged with many commissions, and taking the position almost of a member of the family—a son of the house. Anne walked with him to the village to see him go ; and the walk through the park, though everything was postponed, was like

a walk through Paradise to both. ‘To think that I am going to prepare for your arrival is something more than words can say,’ he told her as they parted. ‘I cannot understand how I can be so happy.’ All this lulled her heart to rest, and filled her mind with sweetness, and did everything that could be done to hoodwink that judgment which Anne herself would so fain have blindfolded and drowned. This she did not quite succeed in doing—but at all events she silenced it, and kept it quiescent. She began to prepare for the removal with great alacrity and pleasure; indeed, the thought of it cheered them all—all at least except Heathcote Mountford, whose views had been so different, and whose indignation and annoyance, though suppressed, were visible enough. He was the only one who had not liked Cosmo. But then he did not like the family plans, nor their destination, nor anything, Rose said with a little pique. Anne, for her part, avoided Heathcote, and declared to herself that she could not bear him. What right had he to set up a tribunal at which Cosmo was judged. That she should do it was bad

enough, but a stranger! She knew exactly what Heathcote thought. Was it because she thought so, too, that she divined him, and knew what was in his heart?

CHAPTER XXV.

PACKING UP.

MOUNT was soon turned upside down with all the excitement of packing. It was a relief from the monotony which hangs about a house from which the world is shut out, and where the family life is still circling round one melancholy event. Days look like years in these circumstances; even when the grief is of the deepest those who are left behind must do something to keep the dulled wheels of life in motion, since not even the most truly bereaved can die of grief when they will. But in the case of the Mountfords the affliction was not excessive. Anne, whom her father had wronged, perhaps mourned most of all, not because of more love, but more depth of nature, which could not leave the old so lightly to turn to the new, and which felt more awe and

reverence for those mysterious changes which alter the very face of life. Rose cried a great deal during the first few days, and Mrs. Mountford still went on performing little acts of devotion, going to look at her husband's portrait, and thinking of him as a mournful duty; but there was a certain excitement of new existence in both their hearts. So long as he was there they were bound to Mount, and all the old habits of their life—indeed never thought of breaking them, or supposed it possible they could be broken; but now they were free, and their smiles came back involuntarily as they prepared for this exciting removal, the beginning of a new life. Anne's mind was kept in a graver key by many causes. The nameless and causeless compunctions, remorse, which move the sensitive spirit in profound and awe-stricken sympathy with the dead, were for her alone in the house. She only tormented herself with thoughts of other possibilities, of things that might have been done and were not done; of words, nay even looks, which, had she but known how near her father was to the unseen world, might have been

modified or withheld; and she only followed him, halting, uncertain, to the portals of the unseen existence, as she had followed him to his grave. What was he doing there? a man not heavenly, with qualities that were more suited for the common soil below than the celestial firmament above. It was she only who put these questions, not, perhaps as we have said, that she loved him more, but that she felt more deeply, and everything that happened was of more consequence to her. Besides, she had other causes of gravity. Her position was more serious altogether. Even the new-made widow had a straightforward path before her, lonely yet troubled by no uncertainty—but Anne was walking in darkness, and did not comprehend her lot.

Of all her surroundings the one who was most conscious of this was the Rector, who, getting no satisfaction, as he said, from his son, came out to Mount himself one of those wintry mornings to question Anne in person. ‘What have they settled?’ he had asked confidently, as soon as the Curate returned from the station where he had been seeing

his friend off. 'I don't think they have settled anything, sir,' said Charley, turning his back upon his father, not caring to betray more than was needful of his own feelings. 'They are all going off to London—that is the only thing that seems to be decided.' 'God bless my soul!' cried the Rector—which benediction was the good man's oath; 'but that has nothing to do with it. I want to know what is settled about Anne.' Then poor Charley, out of the excess of his devotion and dissatisfaction, made a stand for his friend. 'You know, sir, what a struggle a young barrister has to do anything,' he said; 'how can they—settle, when all the money is gone?' 'God bless my soul!' the Rector said again; and after many thoughts he set off to Mount expressly to have it out, as he said, with Anne herself. He found her in the library, arranging with old Saymore what books were to be packed to take away, while Heathcote Mountford, looking very black and gloomy, sat at the further window pretending to read, and biting his nails furiously. The mild old Rector wondered for a moment what that sullen

figure should have to do in the background, and why Heathcote did not go and leave his cousins free : but there was no time then to think of Heathcote. ‘So you are really going,’ the Rector said, ‘the whole family? It is very early days.’

‘Mamma thinks it will be better to make the change at once. She thinks it will do her good, and Rose——’

The Rector fidgeted about the room, pulling out one here and there of a long line of books, and pretending to inspect it. Then he said abruptly, ‘The fact was I wanted to speak to you, Anne.’

Heathcote Mountford was sitting some way off, and Mr. Ashley’s voice was a gentle one—but he stirred immediately. ‘If I am in the way——’ he said, getting up. Of course he was in the way ; but his faculties must have been very sharp, and his attention very closely fixed on what was going on, to hear those words. The good Rector murmured some apology ; but Heathcote strolled away carrying his book in his hand. It was not so easy to get rid

of old Saymore, who had a thousand questions to ask; but he, too, went at last.

‘No, we are not taking all the books,’ said Anne, ‘we are taking scarcely anything. My cousin Heathcote does not wish to refurnish the house at present, and as we do not know what we may do eventually, mamma prefers to leave everything. It is a mutual convenience. In this way we may come back in summer, when I hope you will be glad to see us,’ she added with a smile.

‘Of course we shall be glad to see you—I don’t know what we shall do, or how we can get on without you. But that is not the immediate question,’ he said, with some energy. ‘I have come to ask you, now that you have seen Douglas, what is settled, Anne?’

This was the first time the question had been put formally into words. It gave her a little shock. The blood all rallied to her heart to give her strength to answer. She looked him in the face very steadily, that he might not think she was afraid. ‘Settled?’ she said, with a little air of surprise. ‘In present

circumstances, and in our deep mourning, what could be settled? We have not even discussed the question.'

'Then I say that is wrong, Anne,' said the Rector in a querulous voice. 'He is a young man, and I am an old one, but it is not a question I should leave undiscussed for an hour. It should be settled what you are going to do.'

'So far it is settled,' she said. 'My duty is with mamma and Rose.'

'What, Anne!' cried Mr. Ashley. 'God bless my soul! You are engaged to be married, and your duty is to your mother and sister? I don't know what you young people mean.'

Anne did not answer just at once. 'Did not Charley tell you,' she said, after a pause, 'that we were all going away?'

'Yes, he told me—and I say nothing against that. It seems to be the way, now. Instead of bearing their grief at home, people flee from it as if it were a plague. Yes, Charley told me; but he could not tell me anything about the other question.'

‘Because there is nothing to tell. Dear Rector, don’t you know my father did leave me a great legacy, after all——’

‘What was that? What was that? Some- think that was not in the will. I thank God for it, Anne,’ cried Mr. Ashley. ‘It is the best news I have heard for many a day.’

‘Oh, don’t speak as if it were something new! Mr. Ashley, he left me the care of the property, and the charge of Rose. Can I do whatever I please with this on my hands?’

‘Is that all?’ the Rector said, in a tone of disappointment; ‘but this is exactly the work in which Douglas could help you. A man and a barrister, of course he knows all about it, much better than you can do. And do you mean to tell me that nothing has been settled, *nothing*, Anne?’ cried Mr. Ashley, with that vehemence to which mild men are subject. ‘Don’t talk to me of your mourning; I am not thinking of anything that is to happen to-day or to-morrow; but is it *settled*? That is what I want to know.’

‘There is nothing settled,’ she said—and they stood there for a minute facing each other, his countenance full of anxiety and distrust, hers very firm and pale, almost blank even with determined no-meaning. She smiled. She would not let him think she was even disconcerted by his questions. And the Rector was baffled by this firmness. He turned away sighing, and wringing his hands. ‘God bless my soul!’ he said. For it was no use questioning Anne any further—that, at least, was very clear. But as he went away, he came across Heathcote Mountford who was walking about in the now abandoned hall like a handsome discontented ghost.

‘I am glad to see that you take a great interest in your cousins,’ the Rector said, with a conciliatory smile. He did not feel very friendly, to tell the truth, towards Heathcote Mountford, feeling that his existence was a kind of wrong to Anne and Rose; but yet he was the new lord of the manor, and this is a thing which the spiritual head of a parish is bound to remember, whatever his personal feelings may be. Even in this point of view, however, Heathcote was

unsatisfactory—for a poor lord of the manor in the best of circumstances is a trial to a rector, especially one who has been used to a well-to-do squire with liberal ways.

‘My interest is not of much use,’ Heathcote said, ‘for you see, though I have protested, they are going away.’

Just then Mr. Loseby’s phaeton drew up at the door, and he himself got out, enveloped with great-coats and mufflers from head to foot. He was continually coming and going, with an almost restless interest in everything that happened at Mount.

‘It is the very best thing they can do,’ he said. ‘Change of scene : it is the remedy for all trouble now-a-days. They have never seen anything, poor ladies ; they have been buried in the country all their lives. And Anne, of course, will like to be in town. That anyone can see with half an eye.’

Here the Rector found another means, if not of satisfying his anxious curiosity, at least of sharing it with some one. He put his arm into Mr. Loseby’s and led him away to the big window. The idea of

at least opening his heart to another friend of the family did him good. 'Do you know,' he said, with a gasp of excitement, 'I have been questioning Anne, and she tells me there is nothing settled—nothing settled! I could not believe my ears.'

'My dear fellow,' said Mr. Loseby, who was not reverential, 'what could be settled? A young couple with not a penny between them——'

'We should not have thought of that, Loseby, in my young days.'

'We were fools in our young days,' said the lawyer, with a laugh—'inexperienced idiots. That's not the case now. They all know everything that can happen, and calculate the eventualities like a parcel of old women. No, no, the day of imprudent matches is over. Of course there is nothing settled. I never expected it for my part——'

'But—but, Loseby, he could be of such use to her. They could manage better together than apart——'

'And so he will be of use to her; he's not at all a bad fellow; he'll make himself very pleasant to

the whole party. He'll go with them to the opera, and dine with them three times a week, and be one in all their little expeditions; and he'll keep his chambers and his club all the same, and have no self-denial forced upon him. He is a most sensible fellow,' said Mr. Loseby, with a laugh.

The Rector had no great sense of humour. He looked sternly at the little round man all shining and smiling. 'Do you mean to tell me,' he said, severely, 'that you approve of that?' but the lawyer only laughed again, and would make no reply.

And thus the days went on, leaden-footed, yet getting done one after another, nay, getting shorter, swifter, as the preparations for departure went on. Mrs. Mountford did everything that could be expected of her. She left a sum of money in the Rector's hands for the usual charities at Christmas, and all the requirements of the parish; and she left instructions with the sexton's wife, who had once been a housemaid at Mount, and therefore 'took an interest,' to have a fresh wreath placed on her husband's grave weekly on the day he died. So

nobody was neglected, living or dead. And their hearts rose a little as the time of departure drew near. Cosmo had thrown his whole soul into the work of house-hunting. And he had found them, which was the most wonderful luck, a small house in Park Lane, which was too dear, Mrs. Mountford thought, yet so cheap as to be almost incredible to anyone who knew what Park Lane was. Even Anne felt a little exhilaration at the thought of windows which should look out upon the Park under the red wintry sunshine, and of all the sights and wonders that would be within reach.

All this time Heathcote stayed on. It was very bad taste, some people thought; and very silly, said other some. Yet still he remained. Of course it must be Rose that was the inducement, Anne being known to be engaged; and Fanny Woodhead did not hesitate to say that she really thought the man had no sense whatever of what was fitting, to stay on, and stay on, until the very last moment. But the household themselves did not object. They had got used to Heathcote. Even Anne liked him at those times

when he did not look as if he were sitting in judgment upon Cosmo. Sometimes this was his aspect, and then she could not bear him. But generally he was very supportable. 'You forget I live in London, too,' he said. 'I mean to see a great deal of you there. You may as well let me stay and take care of you on the journey.' And Mrs. Mountford liked the proposal. For purposes of travelling and general caretaking she believed in men, and thought these among their principal uses. She even went so far as to say, 'We shall be very well off in London with Mr. Douglas and your cousin Heathcote:' so strangely had everything changed from the time when St. John Mountford disinherited his daughter because Cosmo was a nobody. Anne did not know what to think of this change of sentiment. Sometimes it seemed to make everything easier, sometimes to make all further changes impossible. Her heart beat with the idea of seeing him almost daily, looking for his constant visits, feeling the charm of his companionship round her: and then a mist would seem to gather between them, and she would foresee

by instinct how Cosmo might, though very near, become very far. After this she would stop short and upbraid herself with folly. How could constant meeting and family companionship make them less near to each other? nothing could be more absurd: and yet the thought—but it was not a thought, scarcely a feeling, only an instinct—would come over her and give her a spiritual chill, a check in all her plans.

‘Mamma says she thinks we will be very well off in London,’ said Rose, ‘and we can go to concerts, and all those sorts of things. There is nothing in a concert contrary to mourning. Dances, of course, and *gay* parties are out of the question,’ she added, with a slight sigh of regret; ‘but it is just when we are going to public places that gentlemen are so useful. You will have your Douglas and I shall have cousin Heathcote. We shall be very well off——’

To this Anne made no reply. She was taking her papers out of the drawers of her writing-table, arranging them in a large old despatch-box, in which

they were henceforth to be carried about the world. Rose came and stood over her curiously, looking at every little bundle as it was taken out.

‘I can see Mr. Douglas’s writing,’ she said. ‘Have you got a great many letters from Mr. Douglas, Anne?’ She put out her hand to touch one that had strayed out of its place. ‘Oh, may I look at it? just one little peep. I want so much to know what a real love-letter is like.’

Anne took her letter up hastily and put it away with a blush and tremor. These sacred utterances in Rose’s hands would be profanation indeed. ‘Wait, Rosie, she said, ‘wait, dear: you will soon have letters of all kinds—of your very own.’

‘You mean,’ said Rose, ‘that now that I am the rich one people will like me the best? Anne, why didn’t you give up Mr. Douglas when papa told you? I should have, in a moment, if it had been me; but I suppose you never thought it would come to anything. I must say I think you have been very foolish; you ought to have given him up, and

then, now, you would have been free to do as you pleased.'

'I did not make any calculations, Rose. Don't let us talk about it, dear, any more.'

'But I want to talk of it. You see now you never can marry Mr. Douglas at all: so even for that it was silly of you. And you affronted papa—you that always were the clever one, the sensible one, and me the little goose. I can't think how you could have made such a mistake, Anne!

Anne did not make any answer. The words were childish, but she felt them like a shower of stones thrown at her. 'Now you never can marry Mr. Douglas at all.' Was this how it was going to be?

'Mr. Loseby says,' Rose continued, 'that when I am of age I ought to make a fresh settlement. He says it is all wicked, and blames papa instead of you; but I think you are certainly to blame too. You always stand to a thing so, if you have once said it. A fresh settlement means a new will; it means that

I am to give you back a large piece of what papa has left to me.'

'I do not wish you to do so, Rose. If Mr. Loseby had told me first, I should not have let him speak on such a subject. Rose, remember, you are not to do it. I do not wish any fresh settlement made for me.'

'If Mr. Loseby says it, and mamma says it, of course I must do it, whether you consent or not,' said Rose. 'And, besides, how can you ever marry Mr. Douglas unless there is a fresh settlement? Oh,' cried Rose, 'there is that sealed letter—that secret that you would not let me open—that is to be kept till I am twenty-one. Perhaps that will change everything. Look here; there are only you and me here, and I would never tell. I do so want to know what it is: it might show one what to do if one knew what was in it. Let me, let me open it, Anne!'

'Rose! that is sacred. Rose! you must not touch it. I will never forgive you if you so much as break one seal,' cried Anne.

'Well, then, do it yourself. What can it matter

if you break it to-day or in two years and a half? Papa never could mean that you were to keep it there and look at it, and never open it for two years and a half.' All this time Rose turned over and over the little packet with its three red seals, playing with it as a cat plays with a mouse. 'Perhaps it changes everything,' she said; 'perhaps there is a new will here without me having to make it. Why should we all be kept in such suspense, not knowing anything, and poor Mr. Douglas made so unhappy?'

'Did Mr. Douglas tell you that he was unhappy?' said Anne, humouring her tormentor, while she kept her eyes upon the letter. 'Dear Rose, put it back again; here is the place for it. I have a great deal to do, and to think of. Don't worry me, dear, any more.'

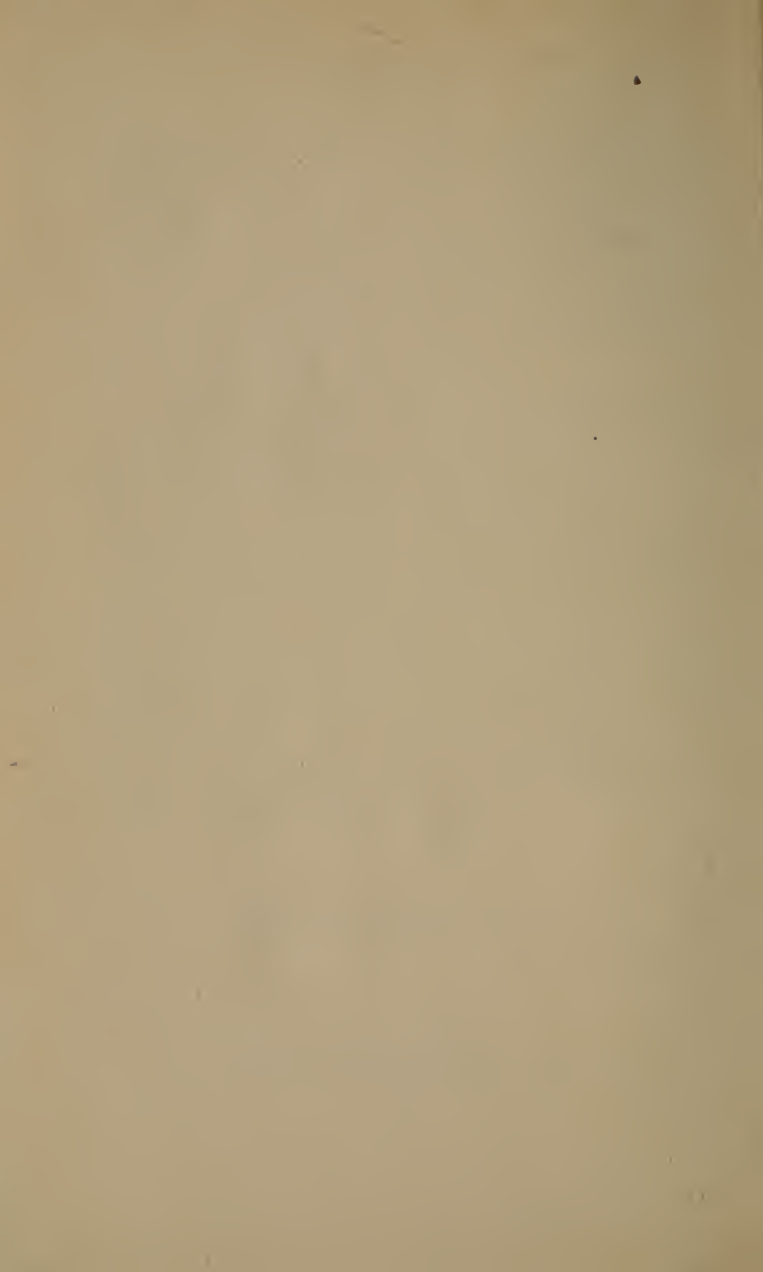
Then Rose put it back, but with reluctance. 'If it were addressed to me I should open it at once,' she said. 'It is far more important now than it will be after. Mr. Douglas did not tell me he was unhappy, but he let mamma guess it, which was much the same. Anne, if I were you, I would break the

engagement; I would set him free. It must be dreadful to hold anyone like that bound up for life. And when you think—if nothing turns up, if this is to be the end, if you never have money enough to marry, why shouldn't you do it now, and give yourselves, both of you, another chance?'

Anne rose up from her papers, thrusting them into the despatch-box pell-mell in the confusion of her thoughts. The little calm matter-of-fact voice which sounded so steadily, trilling on like a large cricket—was it speaking the truth? was this, perhaps, what it would have to come to? Her hands trembled as she shut the box hastily; her limbs shook under her. But Rose was no way disturbed. 'You would be sure to get someone else with more money,' she said serenely, 'and so would he.'

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